

MAXWELL GRANT
MORE TALES OF PRESTIGITECTION

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NORGIL

More Tales of Prestidigitaction

by Maxwell Grant

Creator of The Shadow

NORGIL THE MAGICIAN returns to battle giants of crime in this second series of adventures. Using elements of stage magic and marvelous illusions, the fearless crimefighter displays the versatile skill of a Houdini on one hand and The Shadow on the other.

Walter B. Gibson, who wrote these novelettes for pulp magazines four decades ago, is uniquely qualified to narrate these fast-paced exploits. Under the pseudonym Maxwell Grant, he created the most popular pulp hero of them all—The Shadow! And, under his own name, he is one of the world's leading authorities on magic and magicians, as well as a former student, friend and ghostwriter for the most famous magician of them all—Houdini!

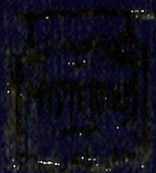
Each story involves a stage illusion made famous by a real-life magician, and an introduction explains how each trick led to another adventure for Norgil. They are published in book form for the first time.

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NORGIL

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Maxwell Grant



1979
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New York

NORGIL: MORE TALES OF PRESTIDIGITECTION

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To
Two Old Friends
in Magic
MAXWELL HOLDEN
and
U.F. "GEN" GRANT
from each of whom
I borrowed a name
to form
MAXWELL GRANT

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Introduction

In Retrospect

WHEN MY FIRST selection of Norgil stories emerged from a 40-year seclusion and appeared in book form only a year ago, I prefaced the volume with an account of how the character and the series had sprung full-blown into the pages of *Crime Busters*, a new magazine published by Street & Smith. In the preface, I also referred to some well-known magicians of that period and how I had blended some of their attributes and activities into the fictional personality of Norgil. In the stories themselves, I included occasional references to famous magicians of the past, so it was not surprising that I should unwittingly introduce a future great as a prototype of one of the lesser characters.

I wrote most of the stories while I was living in Maine. On a trip to New York I stopped over in Boston to visit with the Great Blackstone, who was appearing at a vaudeville theater there. Perched on Blackstone's dressing room table was a

ventriloquist's dummy. When I asked how he happened to be adding a vent act to his already sizeable repertoire, he laughed and said that the dummy belonged to a young magician who had come backstage to see him and had asked if he could park the dummy there while he was watching Blackstone's act. Blackstone, always indulgent to budding magi, had told him that he could.

"The kid's out front watching the movie," added Blackstone. "He'll be back to pick up the dummy after the last show, so we'll take them along to a special dinner that the local magicians are throwing for me."

The young magician came backstage, reclaimed his dummy and went along with us to the dinner, where he put on a nice vent act. His name was Jay Marshall and I learned that he and the dummy frequently hitchhiked their way to various places, including magical conventions. That struck me as such a novel idea that I injected just such a team into one of the Norgil stories. During the years that followed, I met Jay at intervals and heard later that he had retired his original dummy for a loquacious hand puppet named Lefty and that the two were "going places."

One of the places was Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe in New York, where I first caught the act. When I next heard from Jay, he invited me backstage at the Radio City Music Hall, where he and Lefty were featuring the bill. Topping all that, on the night of July 17, 1976, the Society of American Magicians celebrated the Bicentennial Year by putting on one of the biggest magic shows ever, in the Philadelphia Academy of Music, with Jay Marshall, assisted by Lefty, appearing as Master of Ceremonies.

Since I had been president of the Philadelphia Assembly of the S.A.M. exactly fifty years before, I was called upon to celebrate my Semicentennial by coming on stage to present Jay with a plaque acknowledging him as one of

magic's truly greats. A far cry from our chance meeting in Blackstone's dressing room some thirty years before, but we both wished that he could have been there to see it. So to sum it all:

That's why I dedicated my first book of Norgil stories "To Jay Marshall—An inspiration then—And now," and included "Battle of Magic," the story that depicted him back then, so that he can read it now and realize how good he was then and is now.

—*Walter Gibson*

The Ghost that Came Back

WHEN PEOPLE go ghost-hunting, their imagination is keyed to a pitch where simple events seem fanciful. There was an old dark house where a weird blue light flickered along a row of upstairs windows and vanished like a lurking ghost whenever a car came into the driveway. Naturally, all drivers promptly turned around and sped away, until one man was so scared that he backed his car from the driveway to get away more quickly. To his amazement, the flickery light returned along the row of windows, and that explained the mystery. It was just a reflection of the car's headlights, the blue color being caused by the tint of the old window glass.

All ghostly manifestations are not that easily solved, however. Take the case of Hank, the country boy, who told the hangers-on outside the village store that every evening when he came past the old abandoned cemetery, he saw a ghost standing in the gateway, and when he said, "Hi, Ghost!" it gave a friendly nod in return. Hank told that tale so often that one day Bart, the village prankster, bought a big white sheet and told the crowd:

"Keep watching tonight, boys, and you'll see that hick Hank come tailing in here hell-bent. I'm going to let him see what a real ghost looks like."

So at dusk Bart went out to the cemetery, wound himself in the sheet with a fold drawn down for a hood, and took his stance in the gateway until he saw Hank approach, whistling in the moonlight. Then, as Bart stepped forward, Hank stopped short, gaped in surprise, then widened his lips into a grin as he exclaimed: "Well, well! So there are two of you here tonight!"

Bart looked over his shoulder and saw that Hank was right. The gang down at the village store didn't have long to wait before a figure came tailing in, hell-bent, as Bart had promised.

Only it wasn't Hank, it was Bart himself, with his sheet streaming out behind him.

The Ghost that Came Back

Chapter I THE GHOST HOUSE

SILENT, BLACK, MISSHAPEN, the old house sprawled in hazy outline beneath cloud-filtered moonlight. From its squatty, pillared front spread low, queer-roofed wings. Beyond those wings the gabled center of the building blended against the background of a cypress grove.

Those big trees were like sentinels guarding this forgotten spot. The evasive *clunk-clunk* of the frogs might well have come, not from the surrounding swamp, but from the strange mansion itself. When the slight wind stirred, great tufts of Spanish moss waved from tree boughs, like warning hands ordering all venturers away.

Behind the wheel of the parked coupe, Norgil, the magician, kept an intent gaze upon the bizarre scene, while he purred a question to the girl beside him:

“Still jittery, Miriam?”

“No. Not exactly.” Miriam Laymond was firm in tone. “Only the place really *is* ghostly.”

"It ought to be," assured Norgil. "Old Roger Clendon kept on building it until the day he died, because he thought that spirits guided him. Which makes it a real ghost house if ever there was one."

Miriam sat silent. Secretly, she wished that she was back in the hotel at Salacca. She could hardly believe that they were less than a dozen miles from that small but prosperous Southern city. She hadn't bargained for a sight so weird as the old house near the swamp when Norgil had invited her to accompany him upon this secret survey.

"Tomorrow," mused Norgil, "I am to visit this house officially, and spend the night alone here. From the scientific standpoint, I am to learn if the place is actually haunted, as some natives testify. Actually, my sojourn will prove a real publicity stunt for my magic show."

Miriam knew all that. She supplied a suggestion of her own.

"Let's get back to town," she said. "Forget the ghosts until tomorrow."

Norgil chuckled as he gave the girl's shoulder a reassuring pat.

"Stay right here," he told her. "If you want me, I'll be on the second floor, right under that funny-looking gable, in the room where old Clendon died."

Miriam started a protest. Half out of the car, Norgil quieted her, reminding her that she had a gun and that the spooks—if there were any—would probably confine themselves to the house itself. He would only be gone a quarter hour, he told her, but the visit might prove important.

"Something may come up to queer the stunt tomorrow," said the magician. "Hugo Clendon—the old man's nephew—is due in town, and he may reverse the lawyer's decision which allows me to visit the house."

"So I'm staging the trip on my own, in advance, and you're the witness, Miriam. Tell you what. I'll blink a light

when I reach the top room, and if I stay there more than ten minutes"—Norgil added a chuckle—"you can come up and get me."

Moving from the spot where the coupe was hidden beneath moss-boughed trees, Norgil crossed an open space to the house. He had chosen a timely moment for his advance, as the clouds had just formed a thick blanket that dwindled the straggly moonlight.

Even from her vantage point, Miriam could not see the magician's arrival beneath the sheltering wall, where Norgil groped for a door that he had spied during moments of better visibility.

The door was unlocked. That was hardly necessary, for it was so rickety upon its hinges that it served no longer as a barrier. Once inside, Norgil moved along a floor that creaked despite his constant efforts to avoid all sound.

Cautious with his flashlight, Norgil investigated rooms on the ground floor. A few were furnished, the rest bare; but all were dusty, and showed signs of long neglect. Though old Roger Clendon had died only a month or so ago, he had paid no attention to the finished portions of the house. Whenever a new room was built, the old man had moved into it. That policy had been part of the mania which had induced him to continually add sections to the house.

To Norgil, ghosts were fables. Nevertheless, he investigated so-called haunted houses in scientific style. In this case, allowing that there could be a ghost, it would necessarily be the specter of old Roger Clendon. That was why Norgil made for the gabled portion of the building, the last section that the dead owner had inhabited.

Looking for a stairway, Norgil found a door that pushed open into a rear passage. It was lucky that he was keeping his flashlight focused on the floor. One step farther would have carried him into a gaping pit. The passage, about the

size of a small pantry, had never been floored.

Solid cement marked the cellar, nearly ten feet below. Flicking the light upward, Norgil saw another cavity where there should have been a high ceiling. That was something to remember: a floorless room above.

Reversing his course, Norgil found a stairway near the front of the house. He creaked his way to the second floor and followed a hallway toward the room beneath the gables. He reached it, an apartment of ample size that formed a dead end in the unfinished house.

A curious room, as sprawly as the house itself, with paneled walls that extended into tiny alcoves. Norgil saw large doorless closets, two gaping from side corners, a third at the very rear of the room.

In one alcove was a narrow, rickety couch that had probably been Clendon's deathbed. In another, near a window that Norgil had noted from the car, was a table with an old oil lamp resting upon it.

Lighting the lamp, Norgil moved it slightly so that it would shine against the drawn shade. Moving between, he stood there a few moments so that Miriam could observe his silhouette, from outside. Then, edging toward a deeper corner, Norgil surveyed the room.

Lamplight rendered the apartment even spookier than had the darkness. The wavers of the flame, caused by a faulty wick, seemed tremors produced through the touch of an unseen hand. Chairs and their shadows were distorted by the uneven glow. Everywhere, encroaching darkness was like a waiting monster, ready to engulf the pitiful light, once it remained unwatched.

Again, Norgil reminded himself that he had no faith in ghosts. He needed that self-encouragement. No wonder old Clendon had hobnobbed with imaginary spooks.

Shrugging away his own imagination, Norgil turned toward

a corner closet, began to inspect it with his flashlight. He was conscious of a tenseness, the sort that enlarged the trifling sounds that were common to the old house.

There was a soft rustle from behind him. Norgil explained it mentally as a slight flutter of the window shade. The sound persisted. With instinct surmounting reason, Norgil inched his head by degrees, until he gained a slanted view across his right shoulder.

It wasn't imagination. Against the window shade, he saw a shadowy profile of a woman, recognizable by the fluff of hair above the forehead. Norgil's lips formed a smile. If Miriam thought she could turn the tables and give him a fright, she had made a bad guess. Moving in between the light and the window was a giveaway on which the girl hadn't calculated.

Sudden tenseness halted Norgil before he could wheel about. Something else had come into that picture against the window screen—a hand, moving forward with determination. In it, the unmistakable outline of a pointing revolver!

The gun was aiming for Norgil's neck, so close that he could fancy he felt its chill. He didn't wait to see a shadowy finger twitch. He made a whirl about, that turned into a long, desperate dive. The gun roared just above his ducking head.

The singe that scorched the magician's wavy hair gave added urge to his drive. He bowled his feminine antagonist half across the room, knocking the gun from her fist with a hard swing of his arm. A few seconds later, he had her arms clamped; his eyes were meeting those of a frightened girl whose face betrayed astonishment along with fear.

Norgil was right. The girl wasn't Miriam. She was a blonde, a direct contrast to the brunette who had stayed in the car. Quick of emotion, the blonde had changed from a would-be murderess into a frail, terrified creature. Again, her mood altered. Fright fading, she spoke in a voice that choked with apology, rather than dread.

"I'm sorry," the girl admitted. "I—well, I made a mistake. I thought you were someone else."

Norgil released his grip and stood with folded arms. Apparently, the girl hadn't realized that her own statement was a confession that she had come here with intent to kill.

Such a situation called for suavity. Norgil provided it as he deftly scooped the revolver from the floor and let the weapon nest idly in his hands.

"So there is someone?" he remarked, smoothly. "Someone who might have been here; someone whom you would willingly have killed—"

The blonde nodded at Norgil's uncompleted statement. Then, in simple, naive tone that matched the calmness of her blue-eyed stare, she added the words that astounded Norgil even more.

"Yes," said the girl. "There is such a man. He is my brother."

Chapter II

WHERE DEATH FAILED

MASTERED BY amazement, Norgil nearly dropped the revolver that he held. The calm-spoken blonde could have grabbed the gun, had she so chosen. The fact that she ignored it was further evidence that she was stirred by unusual motives. Though prepared to kill her own brother, she was quite willing to trust a stranger that she had met in this weird house!

Before Norgil could down his surprise and put further questions, his attention was diverted elsewhere. Again, he caught tokens of an approach, the sounds of creeping footsteps from the hallway.

The blonde heard them, too. She made a snatch for the gun, but Norgil pawed her aside. He covered the doorway in such businesslike fashion that the girl was satisfied. She felt that Norgil was quite capable of dealing with any new intruder.

A revolver muzzle poked in from the doorway. Norgil saw the hand that gripped it. With an easy chuckle, he lowered his gun, to the blonde's surprise. The girl was treated to another surprise when the new intruder entered.

It was Miriam; and she, too, was bewildered. She had heard the shot and had hurried up from the car, expecting to find anything from a corpse to a ghost, but certainly not a blue-eyed blonde.

"Hello, Miriam," greeted Norgil. "Allow me to introduce Miss——"

He turned to the blonde.

"Clendon," she completed. "Thelma Clendon. The man who owned this house was my uncle, Roger Clendon." Norgil whistled very softly.

"Then your brother must be Hugo Clendon," remarked the magician. "The chap who has final say about my visit here tomorrow night."

Norgil's tone showed mistrust of Hugo. It was all that Thelma needed to pour forth her pent-up story.

"Hugo is to blame for everything!" the blonde insisted. "He encouraged my uncle's mania, hoping to have him put in an asylum. When that failed, Hugo murdered him!"

Doubt showed on Norgil's face. It was his way of encouraging the girl to give more details.

"Hugo was after Uncle Roger's money," Thelma explained. "He didn't want him to waste it all on his crazy idea. I don't know how he managed the murder, but he must have. That's why I came back here—to watch for Hugo."

"The money is here?" questioned Norgil.

"It must be," replied Thelma. "Uncle Roger was very

wealthy, although few people would believe it. But he left very little to Hugo and myself. He intended that wealth for me, because I cared for him. But I was away when he died."

Strain was telling on the girl. Norgil told Miriam to take her to the car. He listened until he heard the side door close below, then began another prowling about the room.

Thelma's story had logic. Norgil had wondered what had prompted old Clendon's odd notions, and now he had the answer in one word: Hugo. But the nephew's cute plot to have the old man declared insane had evidently failed. Murder could have been the next step, as Thelma had suggested.

Such speculation was a bad habit with Norgil. He had a way of concentration that made him forget trivial things about him, and his stage performances had encouraged that mental process. He was moving mechanically when he came to the yawning closet at the rear of the room.

At the fringe of the glow from the oil lamp, Norgil was reaching in his pocket for his flashlight. The action ended his chain of thought; he was again fully conscious of his surroundings, but too late to combat a sudden invasion that came.

Footsteps clumped from the hallway. Twisting about, his hand gunless, Norgil saw two men spring into sight. Both were rough-clad, their faces masked. One was tall, to string-bean proportions; the other middle-sized, and chunky.

Each had a gun, and the square-set man was already taking aim. It was his voice that rasped:

"Stick 'em up, guy!"

Norgil let his hands start upward; then, with a swing of his arms, he carried his body into a complete spin that ended with a lunge through the closet door. With that spring, Norgil found space below him.

The closet was the floorless room above the unfinished pantry, which in turn had void beneath it!

All sounds of Norgil's plunge were drowned by the gun bursts that roared through the room the magician had so suddenly left. With a viciousness that suited his hard tone, the chunky marksman stabbed three quick shots into the closet. He would have emptied his revolver, except for the intervention of his string-bean companion.

"Hold it, Trigger!" snapped the taller man. "What're you shooting at? I don't see nobody."

"I seen a guy, Stretch," retorted Trigger. "He looked like he was reachin' for a rod when he ducked."

"He didn't duck," corrected Stretch. "He took a dive, if he went through that door. Clear down to the cellar. Let's take a gander."

Reaching the closet, Stretch leaned over the edge and thrust a long flashlight downward. When he pressed the switch, a bull's-eye glow spotted the concrete twenty feet below. Stretch lifted his bandanna mask in order to gawk.

"There ain't nobody down there!" he voiced hoarsely. "You was seein' things, Trigger!"

Raising his own mask, Trigger peered. The big flashlight moved about in Stretch's hand. As the fellow said, the pit was empty, complete proof that no one could have plunged to the cellar floor. Even if a man survived that drop, he could not have crawled away in a mere dozen seconds.

"Yeah," gruffed Trigger, "I guess I was seein' things. But you was hearin' things, Stretch, when we was outside. There wasn't no shootin' in here, like you said."

Stretch looked nervously toward the flickery lamp. He muttered that somebody must have been here, but that made him recall that he had just denied the fact. He began to suspect a trap, one that had been set by hands other than human.

"Maybe we was both wrong," admitted Stretch. "But you just done some shootin' that was real enough. C'mon, Trigger, let's lam."

Trigger was more than agreeable to the suggestion. The pair made a hurried exit out through the hallway. Both were thinking in terms of ghosts, which spurred their departure. They went out by the route that they had used for entry, on the opposite side of the house.

In their hurry, the toughs were away before Miriam and Thelma arrived from the car. Fearing that real disaster had befallen Norgil, the girls hurried up to the second floor. Seeing no sign of the magician, Thelma grasped what might have happened. She pointed to the floorless closet.

The distant chug of a departing motor caused the girls to halt their inspection of the pit. The thought flashed to Miriam that Norgil had been abducted. Before she could voice it, a chuckle intervened.

In from the hallway stepped Norgil, suave as ever. He nodded when he saw Thelma still pointing to the pit. Extinguishing the lamp, Norgil used his flashlight to conduct the girls to the ground floor. He stopped at the pantry door, which he pushed halfway inward.

"I had left the door this way," explained Norgil, "and I remembered it when those fellows barged in on me. I took a long chance, but it was the best way to avoid an argument that included bullets."

Rubbing his hands and spreading his numbed fingers, Norgil finally pointed to the top of the half-opened door.

"I grabbed it, all right," he recounted. "It was a hard jolt, but not like the one I'd have taken from the cellar floor. I swung out into this hall and closed the door. I was gone before those fellows took a look.

"That's why they won't be back. From the way they hurried out, they must have believed they saw a ghost. If Hugo sent them, they won't come back without him. Maybe they'll have him believing the place is really haunted."

Out in the car, Norgil and his companions waited amid the

unceasing croak of the frogs. When an uninterrupted hour had passed, the magician decided that the crooks would not return.

"Tomorrow will be soon enough," he predicted. "That's when we'll learn just how Hugo stands."

With that, Norgil eased the coupe from beneath the trees. Soon its fading taillight marked the final departure from the house where death had failed.

Chapter III **THE DOUBLE CROSS**

NORGIL met Hugo Clendon the next afternoon. The meeting took place in the little office of Thaddeus Fennimore, lawyer for the Clendon estate. Since the day was sultry, the conference was held in shirt sleeves, but that informality had no effect upon Norgil's well-formed opinions.

From the moment of meeting, he had Hugo marked. Thelma was correct in her estimate of her murderous brother. On the surface, Hugo Clendon was friendly and presentable, enough so to deceive the citizens in his home town of Salacca.

His exterior consisted of a well-formed, aristocratic face, topped by a flow of marcelled hair. Hugo's eyes were direct, his smile almost habitual. He could become solemn, too, when he referred to his poor, deceased uncle. That was all part of his oily sham.

Old Roger Clendon had died of heart failure while alone in the house. An attack had apparently rendered him unable to take the necessary medicine that the physician had left with him, for the pills had been found untouched beside his body.

The question in Norgil's mind was whether or not old

Roger had received a visit from his nephew, Hugo, on that fatal night. Only one person could reveal that fact: namely, Hugo himself.

From the very start of the conference, Hugo showed the caninness that Norgil expected. Hugo was sorry that lawyer Fennimore had given Norgil permission to spend this night in the old house. Hugo's chief argument was that he didn't care to have his uncle's name submitted to disrespect. Norgil disputed that point.

"Everyone thinks the place is haunted," declared the magician. "If I can put an end to that superstition, your uncle's name will be less mentioned. Besides"—Norgil edged a glance toward Fennimore—"there will be a better chance of selling the house."

"Quite so," assured Fennimore. "You must remember, Hugo, that your sister Thelma has a half interest in that property."

Neither Hugo nor Fennimore knew that Thelma was in town. She was staying secretly at the hotel, with Miriam, and Norgil was counting upon her as a trump card, if needed. But Hugo was already calculating that a compromise would be his best policy.

Norgil could see that Hugo classed Fennimore as a withery old fossil whose opinions were worthless. On this occasion, however, the nephew pretended to be swayed by the lawyer's opinion.

"Very well," agreed Hugo. "The house is yours, Norgil, but for tonight only. One stay there should be sufficient."

"It's all I can afford," returned Norgil. "The show is opening tomorrow, and I'll be busy after that. One night in the house is all I want."

There was thin-veiled confidence in the magician's tone, calculated to arouse Hugo's curiosity. It did. For a moment, the bland young man betrayed a flicker of suspicion. Then:

"Suppose we go out to the house this afternoon," suggested Hugo. "It's been a long while since I've seen the place. I'd like to look it over before you begin your venture."

By daylight, there was nothing ominous about the crazy-shaped structure that old Roger Clendon had built. When the three disembarked from Norgil's coupe, they entered the house by the front door and began an inspection.

Norgil observed places where plaster was missing, spots where chunks of floor had obviously been repaired. When he remarked upon the fact, Hugo supplied an explanation. His uncle, so he said, had constantly subjected the house to alterations, along with his mania for building further.

Fennimore supported that statement, but Norgil gained a definite belief that the lawyer knew only part of the story. From his own scrutiny, Norgil classed some of the work as recent. His theory was that Hugo and others—like Stretch and Trigger—had been secret visitors here in search of hidden wealth.

Hugo led the way down to the cellar. While there, he noted suddenly that he was alone with Fennimore. They set out to find Norgil, and located him on the second floor, in the room beneath the gables. The magician had been out to the car and had brought back a tool kit, with a square box that contained a curious-looking motor.

"What's that thing?" queried Hugo. "You didn't tell me you were bringing any contraptions here."

"It's a magnetic-finder," explained Norgil, seriously. "If I hear any strange sounds tonight, I intend to locate them. Sometimes there are hidden causes of ghostly manifestations."

Sidelonging a look toward Hugo, Norgil could tell that the bland man wished he had thought of using an electrical device himself. There wasn't a doubt that Hugo believed treasure was hidden in the house. He was beginning to worry that Norgil might find it, but Hugo's expression soon became relieved.

Norgil had apparently forgotten that the house wasn't wired for electricity. He picked the box up from the battered flooring. Lugging it to the coupe, Norgil remarked that he would have to rig it up with storage batteries in order to operate it tonight.

They had dropped Fennimore at his office, when Hugo again referred to the curious motor.

"You're going at this thing in a scientific way," he approved. "But there's one thing you don't want to forget, Norgil. That's a gun. There are vagrants around this section. Some of them might happen in on the old house."

Norgil assured Hugo that he would be armed. That brought up another point.

"You'd better have a local permit," advised Hugo, "allowing you to carry a gun. I'll stop up and have Fennimore arrange for one. It's merely a formality, though, in these parts."

They parted, after Hugo accepted Norgil's invitation to drop in at the hotel after dinner. By that time, Norgil promised, he would have the magnetic-finder in operation.

Dark had settled when the desk clerk phoned Norgil to inform him that Hugo was downstairs. Crossing the hall, Norgil poked his head into Miriam's room and told her to be ready. Returning to his suite, he received Hugo in a little sitting room. They hung their coats on chair backs and went into the bedroom.

There, behind a closed door, Norgil demonstrated the motor. He showed how silent, whirring blades lessened their speed when he brought certain metals close to them. Hugo didn't suspect that the apparatus was merely a trick device, intended to worry him.

Nor did he guess that Miriam had stolen into the sitting room and gone again, after accomplishing a very important mission. Hugo was falling quite nicely for the clever setup that Norgil had planned. It happened, though, that Hugo

had a counter-scheme of his own.

They had returned to the sitting room, and Norgil was putting on his coat in preparation for his trip to the old house, when someone knocked at the door. Norgil opened it, to face a square-jawed man who wore a badge upon the left strap of his suspenders.

"I'm Sheriff Curry," announced the newcomer. "You're Norgil, ain't you?"

Norgil acknowledged his identity. Shifting his cud of tobacco, the sheriff added casually:

"Reckon you'll be needing a gun when you go out to that Clendon house."

"I have one."

Norgil produced the revolver. The sheriff plucked it from him. Waggling the weapon by its barrel, he asked Norgil for the permit. Hugo intervened, hotly.

"Mr. Fennimore fixed that!" exclaimed Hugo. "This is an outrage, sheriff. I can explain—"

"You don't need to do no explaining," interposed the sheriff. "This fellow"—he nudged his thumb toward Norgil—"is the one that's got to do it. We're strict on the law around these parts."

Pocketing the revolver, the sheriff clamped a heavy hand on Norgil's shoulder and added a statement that meant much more than the sheriff himself knew.

"Guess you'll have to try our jail tonight, Norgil," said the sheriff. "You can pay your fine when the judge gets here in the morning. Kinda sorry about this, but law's law."

From the doorway, Norgil saw Hugo hurriedly putting on his coat, promising that he would look up Fennimore and arrange for the magician's prompt release. But that talk was empty, as Norgil had realized it would be, from the moment of his arrest.

The tipoff to the sheriff had been arranged by Hugo

Clendon. Master of the double cross, that smug young man had planned a perfect way to prevent the magician's visit to the haunted house. Hugo wasn't going to find Fennimore.

Instead, he was planning a trip of his own to the premises where he knew that treasure lay, hoping that on this last opportunity, he and his helpers could uncover the wealth that his dead uncle had buried!

Chapter IV

GHOST OF VENGEANCE

IT WASN'T far to the county jail, but the way seemed long to Norgil. His arrest had placed him in a double dilemma. His captor, the sheriff, was a man upon whom he had hoped to depend, later tonight.

Even if Norgil argued himself out of the present fix, he would have trouble convincing Sheriff Curry that he expected human visitors at the old house. It would sound too much like an alibi to cover the matter of the gun.

Any argument would be useless, however. The sheriff was considerate enough, but he was stubborn; otherwise Hugo would not have counted upon him. Furthermore, the jail looked formidable the moment that Norgil entered it.

That was something else that Hugo probably knew, but neither he nor the sheriff were conversant with Norgil's ability as a jail-breaker. Norgil had a reputation along that line that outmatched his fame as a ghost-hunter.

A turnkey unlocked the steel door of a cell. Norgil halted before the sheriff could motion him inside it. From his pocket, the magician drew a wallet and extracted a fifty-dollar bill. Spreading the note between his hands, he began:

"By the way, sheriff—"

"What's this!" interposed Curry. "A bribe? I'm warning you, I have a witness!"

"A bribe?" Norgil's tone seemed shocked. "No, no, sheriff. I was merely wondering if I had enough money to pay my fine tomorrow."

"Fifty dollars will cover it," assured the sheriff. "But put that money out of sight. I don't collect fines. The judge does."

Norgil crumpled the bill and shoved his hand into his pocket. But that wasn't where the fifty dollars went. Norgil's other hand slid behind him; moving down the door frame, his deft fingers found the latch socket. Into it, Norgil stuffed the wadded note.

The door had an automatic lock that clicked in convincing fashion. Sheriff and turnkey went their way, leaving the imprisoned magician to his worries. Those didn't concern Norgil more than a few minutes.

Gripping the bars of the door, Norgil threw all his weight away from the latch side, then supplied a hard shove with his shoulder. The door jolted open. Norgil reclaimed his fifty-dollar bill and closed the cell door behind him.

Choosing a roundabout course, he reached the hotel. When Norgil tattooed a signal on Miriam's door, she opened it in astonishment. Thelma was there with her; and both thought that Norgil had already started for the haunted house.

Norgil told what had happened. Calculating that Hugo had gained nearly half an hour's start, he planned a campaign to meet the circumstances.

"I wanted you to drop in on the sheriff," Norgil told Thelma. "But that plan is out. Instead, you'll stay with me. Miriam can go over to the jail instead."

"But what will I tell the sheriff?" questioned Miriam.

"Just say that you would like to speak with me," chuckled Norgil. "Sheriff Curry is a gentleman. He will escort you to

my cell. After that, all will take care of itself."

Taking Thelma with him, Norgil started on Hugo's trail. The coupe was in a parking lot. In a few minutes, they were away from the street lamps of the town and speeding beneath the moonlight of the clear night.

"A half hour," repeated Norgil. "Hugo's at the house by this time. But that won't matter. He thinks he has the whole night ahead of him."

That picture was correct. Outside the old house, Hugo Clendon was approaching from the glade where he had parked his car. After a cautious look about him, he made rapid steps across the moonlit clearing, slackening only when he came beneath the shelter of the pillared portico.

There, Hugo buzzed a signal. Men answered from inside the front door. Stretch and Trigger were awaiting their chief, and they were but two of a half-dozen lurkers posted within the darkened house.

"Norgil's in the hoosegow," informed Hugo. "We'll rip this place from top to bottom. Come along with me, Trigger, while I pick up some of the crew."

From the front door, Stretch glanced into the darkness that engulfed Hugo and Trigger. A sudden, gassy sound came from the tall man's lips. The others took it for a signal, and turned about.

"What's up?" voiced Hugo. "See anything?"

"Yeah!" panted Stretch. "I—well, I thought I saw some-thin'—a face, lookin' from inside there. Only, it's gone—"

"Forget it," snapped Hugo. "Come on, Trigger."

The pair crept deeper. Stretch rubbed his chin, and took another stare. This time, he couldn't give sound to his attempted gasp. There it was, again!

A ghostly face, shining visibly from the darkness—a sight that was meant for Stretch alone, for neither Hugo nor Trigger noticed it. The thing was weird, its eyes glowing,

its lips twisting as if alive!

Old Roger's ghost!

The face was gone as Stretch blinked; then, it returned to view, peering from some doorway. Stretch began a creep of his own, but not in that direction. He reached the portico. Once there, he took it on the run, out into the moonlight.

His goal was a mass of palmetto shrub, thick beneath the cypress trees. Stretch burrowed there, staring back at the house as if he expected its walls to open and emit a horde of phantasms.

Hugo and Trigger had reached a side door, where a pair of men awaited. Hugo posted Trigger there and told the others to come with him. His last instructions to Trigger carried a note of sarcasm.

"Forget this ghost stuff," said Hugo. "Don't let your imagination work the way Stretch's does."

Trigger grunted that he "wouldn't be seein' things," but his thoughts jumped back to the night before, when he had fired shots at an imaginary being.

He was wondering, too, what Stretch had seen from the front door. And as he speculated, Trigger saw it for himself.

A face! Hugo and his companions were creeping right toward it, but they couldn't see its luminous outline! The thing grimaced at Trigger. He cringed toward the side door. As the others turned a corner of a passage, Trigger fled.

As maddened a fugitive as Stretch, he reached the palmetto clump and dived for the cover of its crinkly, spreading stalks.

The man that Hugo posted at the opposite side of the house didn't stay there more than half a minute. He, too, saw the shiny face. Knowing nothing of the desertions, Hugo moved three men ahead of him, to the stairs.

He told one to remain at the bottom, the second at the top, while the third was to wait at the doorway of the gabled room where Hugo intended a preliminary search. Thus Hugo

depended upon human links to the lookouts below, but that system went to pieces as soon as his back was turned.

While Hugo and two companions were creeping up the stairway, the man at the bottom saw the ghost on the steps themselves! How it had moved in ahead was something he didn't try to fathom. He quick-timed it out through the house and took to the scrub.

Soon, the house disgorged two more fugitives in quick succession. The last man heard the cautious call of his waiting pals and shakily gave his testimony.

"It was in the room," he panted, "waitin' for Hugo! I seen it, and started to tell him, but he says to shut up. After that, I done a sneak."

Stretch opined that Hugo had "croaked his old uncle" and that the ghost wanted to deal with him alone. They hadn't bargained to fight ghosts, and Hugo's own statement that Norgil was in jail stood as proof that they weren't dealing with the magician.

The crew retired through the palmettos, until they reached the swamp, where Trigger advised that they "stick around" in case Hugo came out alive. It wasn't good sense to pass up the rewards that he had promised in case he found his uncle's wealth.

Meanwhile, Hugo was busy in the gabled room. Ignoring the oil lamp, he raised the window shades, bringing streaks of moonlight into the room. He began to tap the paneled walls, hoping to find a hollow spot. The task kept him oblivious to the fact that his followers had deserted.

Hugo reached a corner where the moonlight showed a long crack in the woodwork. He probed the space with his fingers. They encountered what seemed to be a piece of metal. It proved nothing but a small, rusted nail, when Hugo pried it loose. The nail clattered on the floor.

Odd, how the thing echoed. Hugo's ears, strained for

sounds, caught a curious *click*, that seemed to come from the center of the room. There was a slight gurgle, too, that Hugo's imagination magnified. The sound was enough to bring the young man about.

Hands planted hard against the walls, Hugo went back into the corner. His eyes were riveted on the middle of the room, where their goggly gaze viewed the incredible. It wasn't just a face that Hugo saw. It was an entire figure, materializing from nowhere!

The thing grew from a pygmy form into a full-size shape. Its weird mass seemed to stretch forth arms. A head lifted from billowy shoulders that narrowed and straightened from their stoop.

As tall as Hugo, the specter poked a vague hand forward, as if grasping for its prey. A fist took on the shape of fingers, ominous in their approaching clutch. A frantic shout came from Hugo, expressing the full emotion that had gripped him.

There wasn't a doubt in Hugo's brain regarding the identity of this specter. His tone told his thoughts, even though his voice was wordless.

Hugh Clendon was faced by the vengeful ghost of his murdered uncle!

Chapter V

DEATH'S HERITAGE

DURING A few seconds, Hugo's impressions ran the entire gamut of his life, centering finally upon one deed—his murder of his uncle. That thought was like an electric shock that broke his numbness, made him forget the menace of the weird figure that had begun to tower above him.

Moonlight gave solidity to the shape. Anything as real as it looked could be overpowered. A figure in white—some person planted here by Norgil—such was Hugo's sudden idea. With that guess, he whipped his revolver from his hip.

The gun talked, with rapid chatter, under the tug of a finger that didn't halt even when the weapon was emptied. Bullets streamed right through the ghostly shape, to *zing* the wall beyond.

That leaden hail didn't produce a waver; nor did the revolver bring results when Hugo flung it squarely at the shape. Instead, the gun was momentarily engulfed by the ghost, then Hugo heard the weapon thud beneath the opposite window.

Terror supplanted his temporary nerve. Cowering in the corner, Hugo thrust his arm across his eyes. In a hoarse screech, he gave the confession that he thought the specter wanted.

"I killed you! I admit it. That night"—Hugo's phrases were disjointed, though still coherent—"the wrong medicine—I left it, instead of your own.

"That's why you died—but it wasn't murder! I didn't poison you. Those pills I left were harmless— You died because you needed your own. They were where you could have found them—if you'd known!"

Hugo's babble became a confusion of admitted guilt and denial, until a shaft of brilliant light aroused him to new alarm. Dropping his arm, Hugo stared into the gleam of a flashlight that was focused from the doorway.

The ghost was gone. Dispelling smoke was all that remained of it, but Hugo recognized the accusing voices that he heard. One tone was Norgil's; the other, that of Hugo's sister, Thelma!

Reaching the unguarded house, they had entered by the front door, in time to hear Hugo's shrieked confession. As

Norgil had expected, Hugo's crew had abandoned him, but those wild shots from Hugo's gun were the sort of sound that might bring them back. That was why Norgil gave Thelma the brisk order:

"Keep him covered! I'll take care of the window."

From the window, Norgil heard the roar of arriving cars. The final stage of his plan had worked. The sheriff, finding the magician escaped, had followed with a group of deputies. But those cars weren't employing Norgil's policy of parking silently beneath moss-laden trees.

Men, piling from the cars in the moonlight, were proclaiming themselves as human foes that crooks could fight. Crackles sounded from the palmetto clusters. Guns began to tongue toward the cars.

The posse scattered. Spreading, they would have become easy targets for Hugo's gun crew, except for Norgil's intervention. Sheriff Curry was soon to rejoice because Norgil had more than one revolver in his traveling bag.

From the window, the men who crouched in the low palmetto were plain in the moonlight. When Norgil began to pick them from the flank, they had to look for other cover. Some tried to answer his fire, but he was low beneath the sill. Giving up that effort, the crooks popped above the level of the palmetto and scrambled for the swamp.

That began the roundup, while Norgil peppered helpful shots from a reloaded gun. Soon Trigger, Stretch and the rest were being hauled to the cars. Accompanied by Miriam and two deputies, Sheriff Curry came up to the gabled room.

Norgil was lighting the oil lamp, while Thelma still kept Hugo covered with gun and flashlight. Dragged from his corner, Hugo could not deny his disjointed confession when he heard it repeated by two witnesses.

Smiling when he heard the sheriff's compliments, Norgil waved his hand toward the floor.

"Some credit," he remarked, "belongs to the ghost."

"The ghost?" queried the sheriff.

Norgil nodded. Hugo stared from the chair where they had planked him. He watched Norgil pry up two loose floorboards that had a space between. Hugo saw a small tin box, with two compartments, a wire running between floorboards to the crack in the corner wall.

"A simple experiment in chemistry," elucidated Norgil, "can become a weird manifestation under the right conditions, such as moonlight, or, as might have been the case, in the glow of an oil lamp.

"In one side we have hydrochloric acid; in the other, ammonia. When Hugo loosened the nail that controlled the valve wire, this happened."

Norgil gave the box a slight shake. The chemical result was repeated. Smoke formed as the liquids united. It curled up from the box in an increasing mass of white. Even when the process was recognized, the vapor seemed to take a living shape, stirring into cloudy forms that were grotesquely human.

"I placed it here this afternoon," stated Norgil, "when I was making that bluff with the apparatus I called a magnetic-finder. Which reminds me, sheriff, that a search of this house is still in order."

Within an hour, the sheriff's dozen men had found the buried wealth that Hugo had been seeking by clandestine visits to the house. It was buried beneath a downstairs fireplace, a small chest containing more than a hundred thousand dollars in currency and bonds, the legacy that old Roger Clendon had left for his niece, Thelma.

They brought the chest to the gabled room, where Hugo stared sullenly at the contents, to which he—a confessed criminal—could claim no legal share. But Hugo had long ago decided upon other methods of acquiring the wealth he wanted.

Chance gave him a break. Norgil was starting from the

room with Thelma and Miriam; two deputies were lifting the coffer, when the sheriff clamped a hand on Hugo's shoulder. Springing up from his huddly position, Hugo supplied a surprise thrust that sent the sheriff against the table.

The sputtery wick was extinguished when the oil lamp crashed. Setting beyond the trees, the moon provided no more glow. It was black in that room where a murderer was loose. In their spring for Hugo, the deputies misjudged their target.

Hugo didn't seek a scuffle with the sheriff. He wanted the contents of the box. Only Norgil guessed that, and made in the right direction. He was met by the blundering deputies as they turned about. They were mistaking the magician for Hugo, when something new appeared upon the scene, so strange that it halted the misguided struggle.

It was the face that Hugo's crew had seen! Unearthly in its glow, the ghostly visage sidled across the room a few feet from the floor, toward the outer door!

While others gaped, Norgil flung himself for the weird object. There was a yell, a rapid brawl, during which the ghostly face twitched frantically, and at moments disappeared. Stacks of money and bonds were bounding about the floor as two grapplers stumbled across the box toward the inner wall of the room.

For a moment, the witnesses saw the ghost's face vividly outlined against the blackness of the floorless closet. Then it plunged deeper. There was a scuffly sound as one fighter tugged himself away; a scream, as another lost his balance.

The ghost was gone amid a trailing wail that came from the pit, a sound that was ended by a solid crush when a human frame met concrete. Close by the closet door, the sheriff poked his head over the edge and gave a loud gulp.

Below, at the bottom of the pit, he saw that ghostly face shining up at him!

A voice spoke from the sheriff's elbow. It was Norgil's tone, a bit gaspy from the fray, but otherwise calm. The magician turned a flashlight down into the pit and clicked the switch. The ghost's face vanished; instead, the sheriff saw the crumpled figure of Hugo Clendon, lying face-downward on the cellar floor.

"Luminous paint," explained Norgil. "Miriam painted the face on the back of Hugo's coat when he left it in my sitting room. It only shows up in darkness.

"That's why Hugo's men deserted him. Every time he moved ahead of them, they saw the face. But he couldn't see it, so he kept along his way. He was alone, as I wanted him to be, when he met the thing that he thought was his uncle's ghost."

More flashlights blinked. Gathering the scattered bundles of old Roger Clendon's wealth, Norgil and his companions left the queer old house, wherein the murderer, Hugo Clendon, had found death as his final heritage.

The Silver Venus

IN THE YEAR 1898 a book was published bearing the prophetic title *Twentieth Century Magic*, in which the author, Nevil Monroe Hopkins, envisioned a whole new era of scientific magic which he divided into mechanical, chemical and electrical devices that would render older methods obsolete. In one word, the Golden Age of Magic was DUE; or at least the Silver Age, because the cover of the book featured a scientific marvel depicted as "The Strange Disappearance" of a miniature statuette of a solid silver elephant.

The twentieth century came and stayed, but Nevil M. Hopkins' book didn't, except as an obscure collector's item, as it is frequently confused with a much more comprehensive work entitled *Magic*, by Albert A. Hopkins, which explains the elaborate stage illusions performed by the master magicians of the Gay Nineties that are still being presented today, with various modifications and/or elaborations.

So twenty years later, when Houdini, a factual magician, decided to vanish an elephant in the New York Hippodrome, he went back to Hopkins, Albert A., for basic principles. Forty years later, Norgil, a fictional magician who wanted to vanish a life-sized statue, naturally went back to Hopkins, Nevil M., for unproven improbabilities.

Each did all right, Houdini with his "Vanishing Elephant" in 1917 and Norgil with the "Silver Venus" in 1937. I am sure of that, because I knew them both.

The Silver Venus

Chapter I THE UNKNOWN VOICE

IT WAS WORTH twelve thousand dollars, it weighed more than half a ton and it was the most graceful creation that Norgil had ever viewed.

Such was the Silver Venus, the life-size statue that stood in the great vault of the Dorchester Museum.

In its standing pose, with outstretched arms, the statue was lifelike. Its proportions were perfect, so that the figure seemed to poise without the aid of the pedestal that balanced it. The face, gazing upward, had an expression that suited a statue of a goddess.

Perhaps a real Venus would have been more soulful; but in metal, the features that Norgil saw were better chosen. They were Roman; sharp, cold despite their beauty. Deep-set eyes, stern nose, straight-lined lips and rounded chin might lack the femininity suited to a human, but for a silver goddess, they produced the effect of austere beauty.

Suaveness had gone from Norgil's own face as he eyed the

statue. He appreciated rare art when he saw it, and he was deep in admiration. That annoyed the big man who stood beside him. The big man was Claude Frenmore, manager of the Dorchester Exposition.

"What about it, Norgil?" demanded Frenmore in a heavy, businesslike tone. "You've seen the statue. Can you do a stunt with it at the auditorium show?"

"A large order," replied Norgil. "I could vanish the statue, but none of my cabinets are strong enough to sustain that weight."

"Build a new one," suggested Frenmore. "You have a few days left. We'll pay the expenses. A vanishing Venus would be a sensation, Norgil."

The magician rubbed his chin. The thing challenged him, and that set his wits to work. Struck with a sudden idea, Norgil turned to Frenmore, then pursed his lips. Frenmore had begun an argument with a third member of the group, and Norgil preferred to listen.

The third man was Pierre Judlin, the sculptor who had created the Silver Venus. Stoop-shouldered and withery, Judlin made a ludicrous but plaintive spectacle as he vehemently shook his shocky, white-haired head.

"I cannot permit it!" he piped. "The Venus is my masterpiece. It shall be exhibited only in this museum, not on the stage."

"Ridiculous!" snapped Frenmore. "Norgil is an artist, a craftsman like yourself, Judlin. You owe him some courtesy. Besides, the publicity from this performance may have some bearing on the price that the museum pays for the statue. That is still unsettled, Judlin."

An eager look came into the sculptor's eyes. Norgil knew why. Judlin, today, was worth exactly twelve thousand dollars, represented by the value of the silver in his statue. He needed that money and whatever additional profit the

sale might bring him.

"Funds are to be raised by public subscription," reminded Frenmore. "If you expect people to cooperate, you must interest them in the statue. Once they have seen it, they will enthuse. Norgil is bringing you an opportunity to reach the public."

Frenmore might have said more, but he caught a gesture from Norgil. With a nod, the big man decided he would let the two "artists" talk it over. He went up to the curator's office, leaving Norgil at the vault with Judlin.

Twenty minutes later, Norgil joined Frenmore. From the window they saw Judlin striding from the museum, pocketing the key to the vault over which he had custody, since it contained only his statue. The sculptor was muttering to himself, but his face looked pleased.

"You fixed it?" queried Frenmore.

"I did," replied Norgil. "I let him argue it out."

"What did you do then? Hypnotize him?"

"No. I found out his real worry. He was afraid that the statue might be injured in shipment. I had a preventative for that. We're going to pack it in the mold in which it was cast. That will save the statue from injury."

"From now on," complimented Frenmore, "I'll leave Judlin to you, Norgil. He's a queer duck, full of temperament, but you seem to know how to handle him."

During the next few days, Norgil further demonstrated his influence over Judlin. Those were busy days, for Norgil's show had arrived in town and was being overhauled for the big performance at the huge municipal auditorium. Speculation was great regarding Norgil's promise to vanish the half-ton Silver Venus.

The magician had arranged a special room as his private workshop, and he spent many hours there, with Fritz, his chief assistant. Only one other person was allowed to visit

there. The privileged man was Pierre Judlin. In his plans concerning the Silver Venus, Norgil had taken the sculptor into complete confidence.

No one else, not even Claude Frenmore, knew the nature of the equipment that was shipped into Norgil's workshop. Crates that came by truck were taken directly to the isolated room and opened privately by Norgil and Fritz.

Meanwhile, Judlin had shipped the mold to the museum vault. Frenmore was told that the Silver Venus would be packed and ready on the final day, when it was to be conveyed by armored truck to the municipal auditorium.

That final day had arrived. Early afternoon found Norgil in the hotel lobby, scanning newspaper headlines that predicted the Vanishing Venus would be the most sensational mystery of the century. Norgil agreed with his own publicity. If the stunt came off as he planned it, the residents of Dorchester would have something to wonder about for a long time to come.

Tonight's show, too, could prove the one redeeming feature in the Dorchester Exposition, which had been a disappointment. Scarcely more than an oversize carnival, the Exposition had been dominated by gamblers and flimflam operators, much to the dismay of the local promoters.

Claude Frenmore, who was passing through the lobby, expressed those sentiments confidentially to Norgil.

"We're hoping to wind up with something worthwhile," said the big man, "so people will remember the Exposition as a success. We've sold out all the tickets—six thousand of them. But what about Judlin?" Frenmore looked anxious. "He hasn't changed his mind about letting you vanish the Venus?"

"On the contrary," returned Norgil, "Judlin has been highly cooperative. He's a secretive chap, the very sort who could be trusted to aid my preparations."

Frenmore nodded as he rose.

"That sizes it, Norgil," he agreed. "Judlin goes through with whatever he says he will. But lately something has been preying on his mind. I wish I knew what it was."

Frenmore left, letting Norgil think over what he had said. The big man was right; something was bothering Judlin. Norgil had noticed it, but had asked no questions. He didn't speculate long on Judlin's troubles. They were the sculptor's own business.

Norgil turned his thoughts to calculating how much his share would be on six thousand tickets ranging in price from two dollars down to sixty cents, on a basis of forty per cent. He was still dealing in mathematics when a bellboy approached to tell him he was wanted on the telephone.

Entering a telephone booth, the magician took the call. A woman's voice came across the wire, a tone that was strangely metallic, different from any feminine voice that Norgil had ever heard. Once sure that she was speaking to Norgil, the caller became brisk.

"Your show's a sellout," said the unknown voice. "With a few thousand dollars coming your way, you can spare five hundred bucks for what I have to tell you."

"That may make sense," returned Norgil, "after I've heard what it is."

The hard voice gave a laugh that carried a bitter ring. Then, cold as before, it added:

"I'll talk when I meet you."

"Quite satisfactory," purred Norgil. "I'll be at the auditorium in half an hour."

"I prefer to meet you elsewhere." The voice was more metallic as it spoke the decision. "Outside the palmistry booth at the Exposition grounds. In half an hour."

Norgil sensed that the call was about to end. He parried, to keep the woman on the line:

"How will I know who you are?"

"You will recognize me," the voice assured him, "when you see me."

"And your name?"

The magician put that question smoothly. He thought that he had created confidence, the sort that would bring a tangible answer. It did, but not the reply that Norgil expected. What he heard actually amazed him.

Like the jangle of a discordant bell, suited to the very words the woman uttered, the unknown voice announced:

"I am the Silver Venus!"

Chapter II

THE TWO-WAY RIDE

NORGIL FOUND himself juggling a dead telephone receiver. The person at the other end had hung up, leaving the magician somewhat baffled. Despite the curious clangor of the voice, Norgil didn't believe that he had chatted with the Silver Venus in the museum vault. Norgil didn't meet up with mysteries like that, except when he produced them.

Was Pierre Judlin in back of it?

Norgil rejected that possibility. Despite Judlin's eccentricities, he knew the sculptor well enough to disassociate him from amateur theatricals. Claude Frenmore, too, could be eliminated. He was too busy with Exposition affairs to indulge in any pointless practical jokes.

That call was the sole idea of the person who had made it; and her purpose was business. Memory of the hard voice kept drumming through Norgil's brain. His only solution to the matter would be to keep the appointment.

It took Norgil fifteen minutes to reach the Exposition grounds, where he used one of the many passes that Frenmore had given him. Members of Norgil's company had reported that the Exposition was terrible, and on this first visit, Norgil found that they were right.

The place was nothing more than an old amusement park that had been amplified with carnival concessions. A few exhibition buildings stood at the far end of the ground, and to reach them, visitors had to run a gauntlet of booths managed by grifters.

Ahead of the appointed time, Norgil decided to make the rounds and wander back. He passed the Old Mill, where battered boats clumped off through bumpy waterways, and came to the Magic Waltz, where cylindrical cars that looked like incinerators offered a ten-cent ride through the darkness of a barnlike building.

"Only a dime!" blatted the gold-toothed barker. Then, spying Norgil, the fellow added, grinning: "Free to you. How about taking a trip, Mr. Norgil?"

Before Norgil could decline, his mind was made up for him. Two of the huskies that he had previously noticed sidled up to him and poked gun muzzles through the cloth of their coat pockets. Those muzzles nudged Norgil's ribs, as one man confided:

"Take the ride, guy, if you know what's good for you!"

Norgil stepped aboard a car, one of the gunners staying with him. The other took the next car, and the trip began. They jounced around inside the darkness until Norgil had inched away from the only muzzle that still covered him. Then the magician came to action.

Raining punches on the man beside him, he left the fellow slumping in the basket car. The attack was so fast that the crook didn't manage a single shot. Vaulting the side of the car, Norgil sprang aboard the next one just as its

occupant flicked a flashlight toward him. The flash went to the bottom of the car with its owner, for Norgil's fists were swifter than his opponent's delayed aim. But that didn't end the fight.

One hooking fist found Norgil's jaw. They carried him away after that haymaker. When he woke up, Norgil found himself in a cellar room with stone walls. He was tied by heavy ropes and propped in a damp corner. From the floor above came a rumble that signified he was underneath the Magic Waltz.

Three captors began a husky-voiced quiz. They wanted to know "how much the dame had spilled." Norgil looked blank, which wasn't difficult the way his jaw felt.

"Get talkin'," ordered a thug. "You know the moll we mean. Her name's Nanette—"

Norgil talked.

His smooth comments convinced the listeners that they had followed a wrong steer. They held a confab, and finally decided that "the moll musta lammed" as she had been told to do. But that didn't end Norgil's predicament.

"You ain't givin' no show," one of the crooks told him. "You're stayin' here for the night. If you don't try nothin', we'll spill a tipoff where you are, so you'll be out by mornin'. Only get this through your conk: We ain't in the snatch racket. Savvy?"

Norgil "savvied." He seemed hopeful that his good behavior would lead to an earlier release. The crooks went out through the single doorway of a heavy-built partition, shoved a bolt shut behind them.

"No show tonight?" voiced Norgil, half aloud. "That depends on how the matinee goes. Ready—curtain!"

He rolled across the stone floor, wriggling in the ropes that bound him. It was a show, all right, and the crooks were missing something worth watching. Contorting his limbs,

Norgil fought for slack. By drawing ropes more tightly about his left arm, he gained some leeway with his right.

He was forcing the ropes downward, until one troublesome coil balked at his hips. Rolling to the wall, Norgil hooked the coil against a projecting chunk of stone. Sliding forward and backward in long, tireless routine, he finally brought the rope below his right hip. Rolling over, he lay face-upward and worked on the left side.

Tightening on the left, he brought his right hand free. From then on it was merely a matter of shortcuts to the climax, which came when Norgil tossed the coils of rope into the corner. That done, his problem was to get out of his cell.

The partition was a bad gamble, for Norgil suspected that there were watchers outside. The ceiling was too high, and Norgil couldn't wait for one of the Magic Waltz cars to drop through, although the heavy rumbles indicated that the creaky floor was none too safe. That thought, however, gave Norgil an idea.

He probed along the stone wall, feeling for the dampest spot. There, he placed his ear close to the wall; he could hear the splashy surge of flowing water. Digging with his fingernails he found a loose stone and worked it from the wall. Seepy gravel lay beyond. Norgil shoveled it out by fistfuls.

The task was easier the farther he went. He struck a flow of water that gushed inward, bringing spurts from other crevices. Stones that had been tight were loosening under pressure. Norgil didn't have to scoop more gravel. It came surging with the water that arrived when he tore away the stones.

The water had reached his knees. Some of it was trickling out beneath the tight-fitting door of the opposite partition, but that wouldn't matter. It would help, considering the way the flood was on the increase. By the time the water was to his waist, Norgil had the complete channel that he needed.

The space was four feet wide, and three high. The stream was coming like a cataract into the pond that Norgil had created, but there was space above the flow. All the space that Norgil needed. He was ready to use it when he heard the bolt slide back from the partition door.

That barrier opened outward, to the discomfort of the crooks who yanked it. When they pulled the door, the flood met them. Norgil saw flashlights flinging wide as they went scuttling off through the cellar.

He didn't wait for their bellowing thugs to organize. Grabbing the sides of the wall fissure, Norgil squeezed through, heading upstream.

His hands gripping wood, Norgil drew himself to a clumsy platform. Something came thumping through the darkness; he waited until it was almost past, then dropped aboard. Crouched low, he waited until the boat emerged into a sudden brilliance.

It was dusk. The Exposition grounds were sparkling with lights. Norgil had finished another free ride that he had picked up at the halfway mark.

He was coming out of the Old Mill, in the stern seat of a gondola.

Passengers up front were shouting that the mill stream was pouring from its channel. Attendants promptly cut off the flow, for this was the last boat. From his vantage point, Norgil could see men flocking from the Magic Waltz. They were on the run for a parking lot, the barker among them.

They knew that Norgil was on the loose, but they didn't know where he was. Sliding from the gondola, Norgil vaulted the exit rail and took to the darkness in an opposite direction.

Crooks had business elsewhere. So did Norgil. There was still time to put on the show at the auditorium.

Chapter III

THE VANISHING VENUS

THERE WAS an alleyway that led to the stage door of the auditorium, and police were blocking it when Norgil arrived. The magician's face, thrust from a cab window, was sufficient passport to admit him through the cordon.

An armored truck was standing deep in the alley. It had come from the museum, and that was the reason why the police had formed lines to hold back the curious. Spectators, however, gained no sight of the Silver Venus. All they saw was the massive, crated mold which Norgil had stated would be used for the statue's shipment.

Fritz was superintending the unloading of the bulky crate. Norgil took over that duty and the heavy object was slid on to roller trucks, then guided across stage to the workshop at the rear. There, Fritz first noticed Norgil's bedraggled condition and anxiously questioned the reason.

Norgil told him all that had happened and ordered complete silence. Then:

"Anybody been around here?" questioned the magician. "See any sign of a girl that might have been this Nanette?"

Fritz shook his head. Only Judlin had been at the auditorium when Fritz arrived some two hours before. Fritz had stayed on the premises ever since. Judlin had left to go to the museum to meet the armored truck.

"Where's Judlin now?" asked Norgil anxiously. "He didn't come back with the truck."

"I asked him to pick up some aluminum paint," explained Fritz. "The quick-drying stuff that I used to decorate the cabinets. I ran short of it this afternoon."

Norgil suggested that they get busy. The room where they stood was half filled by a great chest that looked like an over-size refrigerator. Since it was to be the temporary residence

of the Venus, they opened the door and maneuvered the uncrated mold inside. There, with portable derrick and winch, they worked the mold to an upright position.

Someone knocked at the door of the workshop. Norgil stepped past an array of metal boxes that partly blocked an entrance to a closet. Opening the door to the stage, he peered through the crack. The man who had knocked was Pierre Judlin. Norgil admitted him.

"Glad to see you," he told the sculptor. "I've got plenty to do before show time, so suppose you help Fritz with the Venus."

Judlin agreed. He laid aside the can of aluminum paint and entered the big chest, where Fritz was still working the windlass. Together, they settled the mold in standing position upon a heavy steel platform.

"Forget the decorations," Norgil told Fritz. "You won't have time to do any painting. Be careful when you bring in the glass panels, and give the steam pipes a final test."

In his dressing room, Norgil mentally reviewed the afternoon's adventure. He had a good theory regarding Nanette, the girl with the metallic voice. She was connected with the mob that had taken over many of the concessions at the Dorchester Exposition, but she couldn't have mentioned that over the telephone. By calling herself the "Silver Venus," she had chosen a good way to arouse Norgil's interest.

When first trapped, Norgil had supposed that the girl had decoyed him into trouble; but he had later changed his opinion regarding the mysterious Nanette. He knew what she was: a double-crosser, who had been willing to sell out the mob. But they had suspected it. Whether she had learned what happened to Norgil or merely become scared, it was probable that she had decided her own safety was worth more than five hundred dollars, and had cleared town.

At least Norgil's adventure had told him what the crooks

intended. They were out to seize the Silver Venus. Meeting up with Norgil, they had impulsively decided to hold him prisoner. His escape was a bad crimp for their plans. Unless they had some remarkably clever scheme for stealing the Silver Venus, they couldn't risk attempting the theft the way matters stood at present.

Time passed rapidly backstage. Just before the curtain call Norgil managed a look into the workshop. Everything was well in there. Matters were all right, too, at the stage door. Claude Frenmore had arranged for half a dozen policemen to be on constant duty while the Silver Venus was at the auditorium.

Then the show was on. Norgil faced a packed house that enthusiastically greeted his appearance. From that moment onward, Norgil had them sitting on the edges of their chairs. The two acts of his ninety-minute performance were masterful and brilliant.

Skillful at sleight of hand, Norgil intrigued his audience with deft manipulations, then left people mystified by his larger tricks and illusions. Fish bowls and rabbits appeared from everywhere. Girl assistants flitted in and out of cabinets, obligingly allowed themselves to be sawed in half, and floated in the air at Norgil's command.

It was a stupendous buildup to the finale which everyone awaited. The spectators were breathless when a curtain arose to disclose a "boxed set" which made the stage appear to be a three-walled room. In the center of that set stood a stout-legged steel platform, which served as a pedestal for the Silver Venus.

There it was—the Silver Venus!

Polished, glittering, the life-size statue stood within a cabinet constructed entirely of clear glass panels. Isolated in the center of the stage, Judlin's masterpiece showed to full advantage. There were buzzes of appreciation from the

audience. The Silver Venus was indeed a creation to make all Dorchester proud.

Four assistants wheeled the platform in a circuit, working hard because of the statue's weight. They faced the Venus toward the audience and marched from the stage, leaving Norgil alone. Pointing dramatically toward the crystal cabinet, Norgil gave a sudden gesture.

Instantly, steamy vapor hissed into the cabinet, issuing from pipes in the platform. Like a goddess returning to Olympus, the Silver Venus was enveloped in those clouds. For a full minute, the process continued, then a signal from Norgil ended it. The magician stepped to the cabinet and whipped open the glass door that formed the front.

Out poured the smoke, swirling as it came, until the interior was clear. But that cabinet no longer contained a solid metal statue. All was vacancy within the crystal walls. The Silver Venus had vanished as elusively as the smoke that had enshrouded it!

The blinking audience saw the last traces of vapor leave the glass. It was miraculous, the way the statue had disappeared. Two minutes went by before the spectators realized that they had hands. Then the applause began, to swell into a thunderous outburst. The curtain was dropping, rising, dropping, rising, with Norgil taking bow after bow beside the empty cabinet.

Ten minutes later, big Claude Frenmore arrived backstage, to find Norgil standing near the door of the room that had been his workshop. Enthusiastically, the Exposition manager congratulated the magician on his sensational climax to an amazing show. Then:

"Where is the Venus now?" asked Frenmore. "Frankly, Norgil, you have left me bewildered."

Norgil pointed to the door of the workshop. It had opened. Fritz and Judlin were ready to push out the heavy mold

which made so excellent a shipping case for the Silver Venus. The big chest in the workshop was open; so was the closet door. The only place that the Silver Venus could be was in the crated mold.

Frenmore concluded that; still, it baffled him. He repeated his congratulations, then remembered another reason why he had come backstage.

"The governor is arriving in town," he told Norgil. "We are sending a police escort to meet him. There will be a reception at the Hotel Dorchester. We want you to be there."

"You can count on me," assured Norgil. "I'm only waiting for the armored truck so we can ship this crate back to the museum."

Frenmore was gone, and Norgil had changed to street clothes when the armored truck arrived. Its crew wheeled the crated mold out toward the stage door. From his dressing room, Norgil recognized their faces when they passed. He shouted to an officer at the stage door:

"Stop them! They aren't the truck crew! This is the mob from the Exposition!"

Fritz and others sprang forward. Like Norgil, they expected a surge of cops to cut off the phony crew. But it didn't come. The lone officer at the door started to draw a gun; he halted when the mobbies covered him with their own revolvers.

They had Norgil covered, also. Fritz and the rest were halted, flat-footed. Judlin tried to dive into the workshop, but stopped when he was spotted. Four more hoodlums piled in from the truck. Growled voices threatened doom to anyone who made a move.

Norgil realized his own folly. Frenmore had mentioned the governor's arrival, and that a police escort was being sent to meet him. The arrival of the armored truck had made everything look safe. Except for one man, the officers at the auditorium had been detailed to meet the governor.

The magician's face went glum. The thugs grinned when they saw it. Norgil had done one vanishing act with the Silver Venus. It was their hope to stage a sequel with that same statue—a disappearance from which the Silver Venus would never return!

Chapter IV **SPOILS OF DEATH**

THE CROOKS were in a hurry. They had timed their raid to the right moment, but they had no guarantee of keeping their present advantage. There were too many people in and about the auditorium; if anyone managed to slip out and spread the alarm, the jig would be up.

His own recognition of that situation was one reason why Norgil waited calmly. Tough though the invaders were, they didn't want to use their guns if they could avoid it, for that might mar their getaway. It was better to let them lug away their precious crate than to run risk of bloodshed.

That same thought evidently governed Pierre Judlin, for the sculptor also seemed anxious that the crooks should be on their way. There was something, though, in Judlin's manner that made Norgil suddenly forget all other aspects of the scene. Judlin was overplaying his eagerness. He was betraying it with a nervous tremble that began from his upraised hands and ran clear down through his stoopish body.

One thug, close by the workroom door, was prompt to see the short, abrupt nods that Judlin unconsciously gave to his shocky head. The crook called to his pals:

"Look at this guy! He ain't jittery. He's excited over something. Say—maybe the Venus ain't in that big box!"

The raiders held quick parley. The one who had noticed Judlin was told to "take a gander" in the back room.

He did, but reported nothing there. The others, though, weren't satisfied. They jumped to the hunch that Norgil or Judlin might have tried to fox them by stowing the Venus elsewhere. The only way to settle that point was to open the mold.

The crooks had rolled the crate almost to the stage door; the armored truck was just beyond, backed against an outside loading platform. The mold itself was in two sections, like a big violin case. Two men began to lift the lid. Norgil shot another glance across the stage to Judlin, who was covered by the crook beside him.

With it, the magician tried to dispatch a warning. He wanted Judlin to subside, to leave everything to him. But the sculptor didn't catch the magician's flash. He went berserk the instant that the lid of the mold was raised.

"Don't open it!" shrieked Judlin. "Don't—"

The white-haired man was driving forward as he screeched. Simultaneously, Norgil was launching across the stage to grab the crook who had Judlin covered. It wasn't humanly possible to reach that gunner before he fired. Stabs from the revolver ended Judlin's scream.

Norgil bowled over the murderous mobbie, while Judlin kept going forward in a convulsive stagger. Another crook was aiming at him from beside the mold, where the lid was raised enough to show the figure of the Silver Venus. Though wounded, Judlin tried to jump the aiming gun. Its owner jabbed two more bullets into the sculptor's body.

As Judlin tumbled, the crooks aimed for Norgil. Their guns spoke a rapid staccato, but the magician was diving clear, into the workshop. Rolling to safety, he kicked the door shut behind him. The floored thug reached his feet and shouted for the others to get going.

They did. The whole crew threw their weight upon the crate, propelling it aboard the armored truck. Some were shooting as they went, but there were no targets for that hurried fire. Everyone on the stage had dived from sight, including the lone policeman.

Only Judlin's huddled figure lay in view when the rear of the truck slammed shut. A ready driver sped the vehicle from the alley, carrying away the entire mob. The cop remembered his duty and ran out through the stage door, but his pursuit was ludicrous. There was no way of catching up with that swift-moving truck. The crooks had staged their getaway.

Everyone else had forgotten the Silver Venus. They were gathered around Judlin when Norgil arrived. He gestured everyone away except Fritz. It was then that the assistant started a hoarse-whispered question, close to Norgil's ear:

"Did you see—"

Norgil interrupted with a nod. He had lifted Judlin's head from the floor. The sculptor's eyes were glazy; Norgil knew that his wounds were mortal. But his ears caught the cool words that Norgil spoke.

"You've got to talk, Judlin," said the magician. "I realize all that's happened. I'll understand."

The tone convinced Judlin. He coughed a reply.

"I lost—lost my head. I—I didn't intend—"

A pause. Norgil purred encouragement.

"The—the envelope," gasped Judlin. "In my pocket"—he was making a feeble effort with his hand—"I—was going to leave it—with you—"

Judlin's head tilted back. The sculptor was dead when Norgil settled him gently to the floor. Finding the envelope, the magician opened it. It contained a sheet of paper written in Judlin's scrawl, and another note, more legible, in a different penmanship. Norgil read both messages; pocketing them, he turned to Fritz.

"What I've just read," said Norgil, "is something that I'd already pieced together in the last few minutes. But there's one fact here"—he tapped the corner of the second note, which was peeking from his pocket—"that I needed. Go get the policeman, Fritz. I need him right away."

Puzzled, Fritz obeyed. He returned bringing three officers instead of one. The cop from the auditorium had met up with two others in a patrol car. Tersely, Norgil told them what he wanted.

"There's an old foundry just outside of town," he said. "That's where the mob has gone with the truck. They intend to melt the Silver Venus. We can't waste time, or bother with red tape. We've got to get there and surprise them."

The officers agreed. Since Norgil seemed positive about the destination, they considered an immediate chase as part of their duty. Norgil had revolvers that he used in the show, and his trunk contained a supply of cartridges other than the usual blanks. The officers welcomed the suggestion that he and Fritz should arm themselves and go along to the foundry. They instructed another of Norgil's assistants to call headquarters and summon reserves.

Fifteen minutes brought them to a road near the old foundry. There, they alighted from their cars and crept along a scraggly path that one of the officers knew. From a clump of bushes, they sighted the half-ruined outline of the abandoned foundry, black save for a slight glow that came from the boarded windows of the cellar.

"They're inside," whispered Norgil. "Chances are, they've posted a picket. I'll risk it alone, and signal you when the right time comes."

The officers tried to hold him back, but the magician wouldn't listen. Again he reminded them that time was short, and he added words that finally convinced them that his plan was sound.

"I'm sure I can spring a surprise," Norgil told them. "Something unusual is due to happen. You won't mistake my signal. It will be a gunshot. There isn't time to explain the details, but it's bound to work."

They let him start ahead. Creeping close to the foundry walls, Norgil located the prowling picket that he expected. He waited until the man had passed; then, with consummate stealth, Norgil sidled along until he found a doorway in the darkness.

He was right; only a lone approacher could have managed it. One shout from the picket would have spoiled the surprise, for once inside the doorway, Norgil sighted the glow in the cellar. The crooks were gathered near an open furnace, ready with an old crucible for the melting of the statue.

They were busy at that moment hoisting the stolen mold to an upright position so they could open it clear of the statue. There was a newcomer among them, directing operations; a big man, whose face turned toward Norgil and was revealed by the light from the furnace.

That man was Claude Frenmore!

The fact that Frenmore was the big shot of the mob produced a surprising angle, but it fitted with all that Norgil had learned. At this moment, it was a secondary matter. Norgil was more interested in the opening of the mold.

The crooks pulled the sections apart. There, poised on its pedestal, stood the Silver Venus tinted by the fire's glow. But hardly did the statue stand alone before Frenmore boomed a frantic warning. The Silver Venus was toppling forward!

The crooks sprang away. They didn't mind if the statue smashed, since they intended to melt it anyway. They wanted to be clear, though, when that half-ton weight smashed the floor. But the statue didn't strike with the expected clang.

Instead, it thudded almost lightly. It didn't buckle; it

sprawled. Arms lost their pose and spread upon the floor. The head turned, to stare sideways with its sightless eyes. It was a transformation as amazing as Norgil's vanish of the Silver Venus.

In that climax, the true fact was revealed. The figure from the mold was not a silver statue, despite its metallic glisten. It was the dead body of a handsome woman, painted silver every inch from head to toe!

Chapter V

THE VENUS RETURNS

"NANETTE! My God! Nanette Grevanne!"

Claude Frenmore had lost his booming tone when he gulped the name. Norgil recognized it, for he had previously guessed who Nanette was, and the notes in his pocket supplied the girl's last name.

Nanette Grevanne had been the sculptor's model when Pierre Judlin created the Silver Venus. In form, in feature, she was the statue's twin. The paint that coated her lifeless body was the final touch that made her an absolute replica of the Silver Venus.

Her beauty, however, was a matter only of surface. The crooks knew her for one of their own ilk. She had helped them swindle Judlin of his modest fortune, then had conspired with them toward the theft of the Silver Venus. Nor was that all. As the crooks suspected, Nanette had been ready to sell out her own tribe after they had paid her off for her part in crime.

At this moment Nanette was producing new chaos among her former pals. Dead, her presence here was more startling than if she had been alive. It seemed unexplainable to those

who saw the body, and it produced the difference of opinion upon which Norgil counted.

The crooks were shouting at Frenmore, blaming him for the fiasco. They were reminding him that he had told them that the Silver Venus was in the mold, that he had ordered them to commit their daring raid. They were to be paid off from the profits of the melted silver. If Frenmore expected to get by without handing them their dough, he had another guess.

Savagely, Frenmore flung back accusations of his own. Someone had tried to double-cross him. He was looking around the group, trying to pick out the man. A couple of the mobbies decided to side in with the big shot. They shifted over beside Frenmore.

One wary crook was sneaking toward the door, to hold that vantage point before he chose the side he wanted. Another spotted him and rasped for him to stay where he was. Guns were coming from pockets; the slightest spark would start the fireworks.

Norgil provided it. He pounced in from the doorway, meeting the crook who was on the way there. The fellow fired; so did Norgil, and the magician won, both in aim and speed. The sneak crumpled, and Norgil was diving back, unrecognized, when others opened fire.

First to shoot were those who opposed Frenmore. The big shot thought that one of his own sympathizers had become a target. He bellowed for action, and it came. Crooks sprang for one another, to form a milling mass in the furnace light. Frenmore, yellow in proportion to his size, made for the door. Norgil blocked him.

The two locked. Their guns were talking, along with others, but in the grapple the fire was useless. They reeled toward the light, with Frenmore howling Norgil's identity in order to bring the other crooks to his aid. Three crooks were already on the floor, clustered near Nanette's body, but the

rest stopped their fracas. They yelled for Frenmore to twist Norgil about, so that they could get at him.

Before the big shot could manage it, his opportunity was gone. New voices shouted from the doorway. The crooks gaped at four yawning revolvers, handled by Fritz and the three policemen. A few of the thugs tried to gain cover beyond the furnace, firing wildly as they went. A fusillade from the doorway dropped those unwise mobsters.

Norgil's deft hand worked in beneath Frenmore's elbow. With a revolver muzzle poking his ribs, the big shot capitulated. His surrender ended the last vestige of opposition, and by the time the unwounded crooks were lined up gunless, there was no more worry about how to march them from the foundry.

Reserves had arrived, a dozen officers headed by Dorchester's police chief. Frenmore's gruff protests were useless. The sight of the silvery body on the floor was sufficient evidence to back Norgil's version of the case.

Claude Frenmore, secret controller of the graft and rackets that had ruined the Dorchester Exposition, was trapped with the men who had been his tools.

Alone of all the captured crooks, Frenmore was taken to the auditorium. On the way Norgil promised new revelations to the impatient police chief. One question, the most important in a sense, was the matter of the Silver Venus. Norgil answered that when they finally stood backstage.

Stooping above the body of Pierre Judlin, the magician produced the key to the museum vault and handed it to the police chief.

"The statue is safe," announced Norgil. "You will find it where it belongs. It never left the vault."

"But how"—the chief was blinking, for he had seen Norgil's show—"why, the statue was here! You vanished it."

"Not exactly," smiled Norgil. "Since the vanishing Venus

was intended for this occasion only, I shall explain it. Come into the workshop."

In the rear room, Norgil produced a few small molds of statuettes that had belonged to Judlin.

"We used these for tests," began the magician. "We tried them out with mercury—"

"But what about Venus?" demanded the police chief.

That brought another smile from Norgil.

"Not the god Mercury," explained the magician. "I mean quicksilver—mercury, the liquid metal. It becomes solid, looks exactly like real silver when it is frozen."

"Frozen!"

"Yes. That big chest is a freezing device. We used liquid air for quick results."

The small mold was filled with mercury. Norgil set it in the refrigerating device and closed the door. There was a muffled hiss when he released a lever. Opening the door, Norgil waited until the chill lessened. Taking a pair of heavy gloves from Fritz, he opened the small mold.

From within, Norgil drew a solid statuette that looked like polished silver. He placed it on a little platform, a miniature of the big one that he had used with the vanishing Venus. Fritz brought a hose from the steam tank. Norgil started the vapor. The statuette, being unconfined, was still visible when the smoky jet wreathed about it.

Under the sudden heat, the little figure melted. The liquid mercury poured into the small platform. Norgil had repeated the vanishing Venus on a miniature scale, but on the stage, the confining crystal walls had thickened the vapor, thus hiding the dissolution of the statue.

Having revealed his own methods, Norgil took up those of the crooks, with the other factors that had entered.

"This afternoon," he related, "Nanette Grevanne called me by telephone. She wanted to meet me and get cash for

information. I ran into trouble, but Nanette didn't know it. So she came here. She didn't find me; instead, she ran into Judlin.

"He hated Nanette, and with good reason. When he learned she had a note, all written, that she wanted to sell me for five hundred dollars, Judlin tried to take it from her. She struggled, and once his fingers were on her throat he couldn't stop them.

"Judlin found himself in charge of a dead body, and a note which told exactly what the crooks intended to do tonight. Judlin proved himself ingenious."

Stepping to the closet, Norgil found a package wrapped in newspaper. He opened it. Out tumbled the clothing that had belonged to Nanette Grevanne. From the shelf Norgil brought an emptied can of paint.

"Judlin silvered the body with aluminum paint," continued Norgil. "He hid it in the closet and later stowed it in the mold, while I was on stage. He felt sure that when the crooks found they had Nanette instead of the Silver Venus, they would have to dispose of the body. Meanwhile, Fritz and I thought the mold was empty. We had needed it to make the mercury statue; we were shipping it back to the museum so that the public would still believe that we had used the real Silver Venus.

"One thing worried Judlin. He feared that the crooks might open the mold and let us glimpse the contents. He betrayed that worry. The crooks misinterpreted it, but the facts flashed to me when Judlin went wild. Afterward, I needed only to know where the crooks had gone. Nanette's letter named the old foundry."

With Nanette's letter, Norgil handed the police chief the added message that Judlin had scrawled. The chief read it aloud. In it, Judlin stated what he had done, also his intention to flee the country, leaving both notes where Norgil

would later find them. The news brought a hoarse comment from Frenmore, who stood as a handcuffed listener.

"That lets me out," voiced the big shot. "I had nothing to do with Nanette's death. You can't pin murder on me!"

"You're forgetting Judlin," reminded Norgil. "Your mob murdered him in commission of a crime that you ordered."

The big shot's eyes went frozen. They were that way when the police chief led him out. Beyond the imaginary faces of Nanette Grevanne and Pierre Judlin, past the vision of the Silver Venus, safe where it belonged, Claude Frenmore could see the bars of a lifer's cell!

Double-Barreled Magic

MERE MENTION of any great American magician will conjure up such visions of big theaters, lavish scenery and elaborate equipment that it would seem incongruous to picture them on a carnival platform or other outdoor show, yet they all proudly admitted to such origins.

Backstage at Keith's Theatre in Philadelphia, Houdini told me that he and his wife Bessie were doing their old circus act of twenty-five years before, but back then they had wound up in a dime museum doing nine shows a day for \$18 a week, while now they were presenting it twice a day for \$1800.

At Thurston's magnificent home on Long Island, he recounted how he had been stranded with a carnival in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and had dodged the sheriff long enough to wire Pittsburgh and book the whole troupe with all expenses paid.

Years later, when I traveled with Blackstone, he and his brother recalled how, as Harry and Pete Bouton, they had worked a carnival show. While Harry was getting the act set, Pete sold tickets out front and kept calling from the booth: "Step right up! Hocus Pocus, Conjurokus! This way to the Magic Show! This way!"

One day a friend of Pete's named Bill was running a Wheel of Chance in a booth further down the midway and Pete suddenly spied some blue-clad officers filtering through the crowd. Pete promptly changed his cry from "Hocus Pocus! This way, folks!" to "Illbay! Illbay! Opskay! Opskay! Ohblay! Ohblay!," which translated from pure Hog-Latin meant: "Bill! Bill! Cops! Cops! Blow! Blow!" By the time the police had reached Bill's booth, he had dismantled his illegal wheel and taken it out through the back of his tent, while the Bouton Brothers were beginning their show in theirs.

Those were exciting days, so it is only proper that Norgil, whose roots belonged to that era, should have his share of outdoor adventure during his own quest for magical fame.

Double-Barreled Magic

Chapter I NORGIL TAKES A TRIP

NORGIL SAT BY the window of his cramped dressing room, reading a copy of the *Billboard*. Along with the bright sunlight came the wheezy music of a carousel, broken by the raucous shouts of leather-lunged barkers. For Norgil's dressing room—if it could be called such—was right in the center of the Eastbury Fair Grounds.

Somebody knocked at the door, and the pounding brought a quiver all along the compoboard walls. Norgil grunted, "Come in," and glanced up as his chief assistant entered.

"Hello, Fritz," said the magician with a smile. "I mistook you for an earthquake. Look"—he was thumbing back through the pages of the magazine—"here's something that will interest you. You remember the Morrini Brothers? They've just closed their season with the circus, and sail next week for South America—"

Norgil interrupted himself, while he was handing the *Billboard* to Fritz. The assistant wasn't interested in hearing

about the Morrini Brothers. Fritz was wearing the sour look that meant things were going tough. Norgil didn't ask what was the trouble. He just sat back and waited.

"They call this dump the Outdoor Theater," announced Fritz. "I call it a stockade, with a platform at one end of it. Steve Cragey was nuts when he booked you here."

"Steve talked them into a guarantee," reminded Norgil with a soothing purr. "And I don't mind working alfresco for a change. Outside air is good for the health."

"Come on, then, and take a look at this thing they call a stage. Maybe you can figure what to do about it."

Norgil couldn't help but smile when he reached the stage. Fritz was right when he termed the place a stockade with a platform. Past rows of benches, set in the uncut grass, was a high barrier of upright boards that rivaled the fence of a baseball park.

The stage gave in spots that Fritz thumped with his heel, and the high half-dome that covered it looked as though it would leak at the first drizzle. It was Norgil's first view of what Steve had described as an "outdoor auditorium," and it was really worth a laugh.

"Plenty of seats, though," remarked the magician, covering the semicircle of benches with his eye. "Listen, Fritz—get hold of the manager. Tell him you want the stage braced underneath with cinder blocks, and a canvas put over the top of the dome."

"But what about the cannon trick? We usually hang the boxes over the audience."

"Keep the cannon stage left. Hang the boxes stage right. We'll work it across stage for a change."

That hadn't occurred to Fritz. Norgil's chuckle brought a sheepish grin from the assistant.

"I guess I can make out," decided Fritz. "By the way, boss, there's a fellow outside the box office wants to talk to you."

"I'll go see him," returned Norgil. "If Steve calls up, answer the telephone. It's on the wall, just the other side of my dressing room."

Going out through the main entrance in the high stockade, Norgil was intrigued by a sight across the way. The space opposite was occupied by a "Ten-in-One" show, with a row of weather-beaten banners in front of its wide, squatty tent. The sideshow had the usual array of freaks, but the funny thing was the barker.

He was fat enough to be one of the exhibits, and he had made the mistake of bringing the Fat Lady out on the "bally" platform. A crowd had gathered, with plenty of wisecrackers in its midst. They were kidding the "talker," and he was trying to drown them out with his spiel. But the Fat Lady wasn't taking it as a joke, which made it all the funnier, for the barker didn't notice the glares that she was giving him. That poor chap would be due for plenty, thought Norgil, after the ballyhoo was finished.

Norgil, it happened, was due for plenty himself.

Someone clamped a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see a long-jawed face shoved close to his. With his other hand, the accoster pulled back his coat and showed a badge.

"So you're Norgil, huh?" he gruffed, loud enough for persons close by to hear. "What's the idea of stalling when I sent for you to come out here?"

The badge looked tinny. Norgil gave it a flick with his finger.

"What's the gag?" he queried smoothly. "Trying to play detective? If they're selling these badges on the lot, you ought to try to get your money back."

For answer, the long-jawed man yanked out a whistle and blew it lustily. Then he pounced on Norgil, who caught him with a trick hold and spilled him halfway into the crowd that had begun to forget the ballyhoo across the way. But the

fellow didn't happen to be the fake that Norgil had imagined.

Before the magician could turn about, three uniformed policemen arrived on the run from the corner of the stockade. They were with the long-jawed man when he made his next pounce, and they smothered Norgil under force of numbers.

Nor were they gentle in their treatment of him. While the crowd gawked, they bundled Norgil to a patrol wagon that showed up with a clanging bell. They pitched their prisoner aboard the Black Maria, and piled in after him.

When Norgil recovered his wind, he wanted to know what it was all about. The man with the badge told him.

"You thought you'd dodge the license law," he sneered, "because the last show got away with it. They've all been pulling that stall, whenever they could, and we've been easy with them. Only this time we decided to get tough."

One look at his clothes told Norgil that the cops had certainly gone through with their intention. He asked where they were taking him.

"Down to headquarters," informed the detective. "You can talk to the police chief."

"I'll talk to him," promised Norgil. "He'll hear more than he expects."

That boast had teeth. Norgil knew about the license regulation, and he also knew that he had not violated the local ordinance that governed it. The fifty-dollar fee could not be legally demanded until the show actually opened. This little episode of Norgil versus the Eastbury Police could be easily turned around.

By the time he was through, Norgil could be seeking amends for false arrest.

They reached the city hall, and there was a smile beneath Norgil's pointed mustache when they escorted him to the door marked "Police Chief."

Since he had offered no more resistance, his captors decided to let him enter alone. Norgil gave them a farewell grin when he went through the door, then changed his expression when he faced the man that he saw seated at the desk.

The glint in Norgil's eye, the tightness of his lips, was his first challenge to the Eastbury police chief. But that look wiped itself away when Norgil recognized the man who waved him a friendly greeting.

"Terry Dorcomb!"

The wave changed to a quick motion for caution. Dark-eyed, with solemn, deep-tanned face, Dorcomb was the type of man who knew how to flash a warning. He had long experience in that sort of business, for Terry had completed four years of active service as an operative of the F.B.I.

"Sorry about the rough stuff, Norgil," undertoned the Fed, "but it had to look real. I'm keeping out of sight in Eastbury, and I wanted to see you. A pinch looked like the best way to produce an interview, so the police chief arranged it."

Norgil's smile was at his own expense, and a tribute to Dorcomb's ingenuity. He was wondering, though, just why Terry wanted to see him. They had met several times before, but never on official business.

"I'm here on a big case," confided Dorcomb. "The biggest case, in fact, that confronts the Bureau. One that presents some peculiar problems, with one, in particular—"

The trace of perplexity was fading from Norgil's eyes. He knew what was coming next, before the Fed said it.

"One problem," added Dorcomb, "that seems to require the skill of a very clever magician."

Chapter II

NORGIL MAKES A DEAL

IT WAS a nice compliment from Terry Dorcomb, but Norgil scarcely heard it. His thoughts had stayed with Terry's reference to the department's "biggest case." That could refer only to Alfred Landseer, Midwest shipping magnate who had disappeared a month ago. It was generally believed that Landseer had been kidnaped, but so far, all demands for ransom had been classed as hoaxes.

Terry Dorcomb was drawing a diagram on a sheet of paper. He beckoned Norgil to the police chief's desk. The diagram showed a dot that represented Eastbury, a curved line for Highway 56, and a square, set back from the road.

"You've guessed it," declared Terry. "We know where they've got Landseer. In this farmhouse,"—he was indicating the square—"twelve miles outside of Eastbury. What's more, we know who's holding him. The Rochet Mob."

Norgil had heard of the mob in question. "Duke" Rochet and his crew of terrorists had staged a series of bank jobs in the South, then had vanished completely. The public believed that the mob had dropped crime to take to cover. Instead, as Norgil was learning, the Rochet Mob had shifted activities to the snatch racket.

"We've got a man right there with them," announced Dorcomb, tapping the square. "He's Pete Pellew, who was tracing the bank jobs. He was lucky enough to get clipped in a gunfight, and with his left arm in a sling, he's a constant example of loyalty to Duke Rochet. He managed, though, to get a message out to us; he sent it by some half-wit farmhand.

"Here's what we know: There's a dozen in the mob, and the place is an arsenal. If we raid, there will be a big battle. Pete can handle himself, if that happens, but we're worried about Landseer. Rochet and the mob have sworn they'll

kill him, rather than lose him. Tell me, Norgil, what would you do about it?"

Norgil had the answer started almost before Dorcomb finished the sentence.

"Draw out most of the mob," he said. "Then make a surprise raid, and count on Pellew to look after Landseer."

There was a nod of full approval from Dorcomb.

"That's what we want to do," stated the Fed. "What's more, we know that Rochet is dickering with a fellow named Monte Kyron, a gyp artist who managed to take over a few concessions at the Eastbury Fair. Rochet wants Kyron to front for the mob when it comes to ransom negotiations."

"And Kyron?"

"He's hedging. We're leaving him alone, so he won't get suspicious. But if Kyron guessed that somebody—apart from the F.B.I.—was going to make trouble for Rochet and—"

"Kyron would call for the mob."

Dorcomb looked pleased by Norgil's prompt completion of the statement. The magician certainly had the idea, but did he catch the final problem that had Terry in the air? Dorcomb decided to put it in blunt words.

"Whoever that mob comes after," he declared, "will be on the spot. He'll be in a jam like you've been, Norgil, when a bunch of huskies nail you in a box and drop it overboard. You've figured ways to get out of things like that. Maybe you can dope out a method to solve this proposition."

Lips pursed, eyes reflective, Norgil was thinking it over. He was linking chance facts he happened to know about. His smile began to form, a little too soon to suit Dorcomb.

"You won't be in a box," reminded the Fed. "You'll have that Rochet Mob on you. It will take more than fast talk or clever hokum. Whatever you do, it will have to go like that." A *click* of Dorcomb's fingers expressed the speed required.

Norgil's smile didn't fade. "Leave it to me," the magician

told the Fed. "I'll have everything framed by tomorrow. I'll phone you here, but meanwhile, have the police chief insist that I was pinched in earnest, with the impression that it was for something a lot worse than dodging a license fee."

Leaving the city hall, Norgil stopped at a telegraph office and dispatched a wire. Clothes brushed, he arrived back at the fairgrounds. He was pointed out by various bystanders who had witnessed his arrest. A show had finished in the Ten-in-One, and the ticket-taker passed Norgil through.

Inside, Norgil found the fat proprietor. He was concerned over a fellow showman's troubles, but Norgil laughed off the subject of his arrest.

"Those banners of yours," suggested Norgil, "would make a bigger flash if you had them spread all over the front."

The fat man agreed. He admitted that the present display was unsatisfactory.

"I'd planned on some banners of my own," continued Norgil, "but it didn't work out. All I've got is a big transparency, like the things they stretch across streets for elections. It's coming in tomorrow, and you can use it for your front."

The proprietor was pleased, but a bit puzzled by the generosity. Norgil, however, had a prompt reason for it.

"The better your front looks," he said, "the more people it will bring to this part of the lot. You're getting the dime customers; mine pay half a buck. So we're not cutting into each other's business."

The logic sold the fat man. Norgil left the Ten-in-One and strolled around the grounds until he found the toughest-looking shill on the lot. The fellow had just finished throwing baseballs at a stuffed cat, with enough success to bring a batch of customers. He was just about to duck in back of the concession and return his prizes when Norgil stopped him with:

"Where will I find Monte Kyron?"

The shill showed a wise look. He recognized Norgil and had heard of the magician's run-in with the law. People who didn't get along with the police had a habit of looking up Monte Kyrón. The shill used a candy box to point across the fairgrounds.

"That's where Monte is," he said. "Over by the 'simp-hister.'"

He meant the Ferris Wheel. Norgil went there, introduced himself to a gray-faced, thin-haired man whose eyes were little black dots and whose colorless lips had a handmade cigarette dangling from them. A few minutes' talk with Monte Kyrón caused the fellow to glance toward the Ferris Wheel, where the "sims" were being hoisted in endless rotation.

"Let's go where we can really talk," suggested Monte.

"Over in my dressing room," returned Norgil. "There's nobody at the Outdoor Theater. The show doesn't open until tomorrow."

Once in the dressing room, Monte put the question that Norgil had smoothly encouraged:

"What was the real lowdown in back of that pinch?"

Norgil didn't reply. He opened his trunk. From the bottom he produced a sheet of paper that Monte first thought was a billposter, then he gasped so far that he would have lost his half-smoked cigarette if it hadn't stuck to his lower lip.

What Norgil showed Monte was a big sheet of five-dollar bills, some missing from the irregular margin at the bottom. With a pair of shears, Norgil carefully cut out another note and handed it to his visitor.

"Neat paper," confided Norgil. "I could shove this queer dough anywhere, except in Eastbury. They're wise to something here. What it is, I don't know. But maybe you could use some, at two bits on the dollar."

Monte was examining the bank note. He agreed it was the neatest counterfeit he had ever seen. Monte didn't know that real bank notes were printed in blanket form. This sheet was

one that a bank president had just finished signing when Norgil was in his office. Norgil had been in a hurry to draw funds, so his banker friend had given him the sheet intact.

"It looks like the real McCoy," agreed Monte. "Only I can't handle it—"

He paused. His mind was working along the line that Norgil hoped. Monte had a problem of his own, that matter of fronting for the Rochet Mob. Norgil's apparent seeking of a partner in one game of crime gave Monte the idea that it could be worked with a different scheme, the other way around.

"No, I can't handle it," decided Monte. "Not while this stuff may be hot. Let it cool, and I'll buy some later. But meanwhile, how would you like to cut in on some real dough?"

"Doing what?" asked Norgil.

"Something that you're smart enough to handle," returned Monte. "Just a matter of sending a few letters that nobody can trace back."

"It sounds good. Let's hear the rest of it."

"Tomorrow. After I think it over."

With that, Monte Kyron left, and in saying he would "think it over," he had told Norgil much more than he realized. What the crook had said, in substance, was that he intended to contact the Rochet Mob in reference to the Landseer ransom, with the suggestion that Norgil aid as intermediary.

Chapter III

MONTE HEARS ENOUGH

BY SHOW TIME the next afternoon, Norgil had not heard from Monte Kyron. That wasn't Monte's fault, for he was anxious enough to interview the magician. Norgil saw that

for himself when he took sly peeks from his dressing room window.

For an hour before the three o'clock matinee, Monte was hanging about near the stockade that formed the boundary of the Outdoor Theater. He was hoping that Norgil would give him the high sign to drop in for a chat. But Norgil, it appeared, was too busy preparing his first show.

Another reason, and a good one on the surface, was the presence of police who had come to collect the license fee. So Monte decided to come back later, which suited Norgil perfectly. The magician needed a few hours to complete his plans.

The matinee audience was sprinkly. That was to be expected, for this was the middle of the week and the big business wouldn't come until Saturday. But from the way the small crowd liked the show, news of its merit would soon spread. From start to finish the act had the audience dazed.

Working on the newly bolstered stage, Norgil performed his skillful sleights with coins and cigarettes. His production acts were both startling and varied; pigeons, rabbits, fish-bowls, even a live goat appeared unexpectedly from the flimsy cloths that assistants handed him.

The large illusions, though, created the greatest sensation. Spectators blinked when a radio set disappeared before their eyes. They gasped when a girl penetrated a sheet of solid glass. And then, in keeping with Norgil's dynamic magic, came the climax of the show—the Cannon Illusion.

All during the act, a wide-mouthed cannon had yawned at the audience from one side of the stage. For the finale, it was wheeled about and pointed toward the other wing, where a large square box was suspended by a rope. A girl in an abbreviated ballet costume ascended a ladder and slid feet-first into the cannon. When she was completely out of sight, Norgil gave the firing signal.

The cannon puffed; it was twisted about, broken apart, to show that the girl had vanished from its interior. The square box was hauled down to the stage. It was opened, to bring out a second box, then a third. The moment the lid of the smallest box was unlocked, out popped the girl, to take a bow with Norgil as the curtain fell.

Through the peephole of the curtain, Norgil could see the bewildered looks of the audience. He knew that they would have half a dozen theories regarding that trick, and none would hold water. Talk about the Cannon Illusion would bring a host of customers to the Outdoor Theater.

An hour after the show, Norgil sought Monte Kyron near the Ferris Wheel. Monte had seen the act and complimented it, particularly the finish. Then, in an undertone, he added:

"About the deal. It looks okay to—"

Norgil interrupted with the slightest of nods. Without moving his lips, he purred his low reply:

"I'll have to stay at the theater a while. A load of new tricks are coming in by truck. See me at six-thirty. The next show goes on at seven."

Monte's own statement was proof that he had contacted the Rochet Mob. Perhaps he had made a trip to the farmhouse, but it wouldn't have been necessary. Pellew's report had included the fact that the place had a telephone. That detail was another of the bits that pieced into Norgil's plan.

The truck arrived soon after Norgil had returned to the stockade. While big crates were being unloaded, Norgil took Fritz into confidence. The chief assistant was amazed by what he heard, but his nod promised full cooperation.

"I'll deliver that transparency to the Ten-in-One," said Norgil, "and have the boys put it up. Once they're started, I'll come back here and help you with the other crates. We can do the job together, but we'll have to work fast."

They did work fast, when the time came. Norgil was

through backstage and out on the fairgrounds by the time his crew of assistants had finished redecorating the front of the Ten-in-One. The fat proprietor was hugely pleased with the results.

All across the space above the ballyhoo platform stretched a wide meshwork, with his banners attached. They were no longer a ragged line, but a built-up display. He was sorry that he didn't have more banners for the center, but Norgil smiled at that objection.

"You have to let people see the tent," reminded the magician. "Otherwise, they won't know you have a show. Keep it just as it is, and watch how it draws the crowd."

Six-thirty came, bringing Monte Kyron. He slid in backstage and took a look for Norgil. The magician wasn't on the stage, although it was all set for the evening show. Monte approached the dressing room and rapped on the door with a touch much lighter than Fritz's. The door opened; Norgil, his makeup half finished, gave a quick beckon.

Seating himself at the mirror, Norgil motioned Monte to another chair, then made the suggestion:

"Tell me about it."

"The deal's all fixed," assured Monte. "Only you'll have to meet the"—he caught himself—"some of the boys."

"How soon?"

"Tonight. After the last show, I'll take you to them."

"And what's the racket?"

Norgil's question was natural enough, but Monte sidetracked it. He was rolling a cigarette when he concluded:

"You'll learn when you meet up with them."

That seemed to satisfy Norgil. It was something else that made him spin anxiously about the moment that he had finished his makeup.

"Did you see any coppers around here?" he asked. "I don't mean this afternoon—I mean when you came in,

a little while ago.”

Monte nodded, a bit troubled. He *had* seen two policemen, near the box offices of the Outdoor Theater. He started to say that it might be best to call up the “boys” and tell them that Norgil’s visit would have to be postponed. But Norgil interrupted with a pleased smile.

“That gives me an idea,” he said. “It’s my chance to call up that dumb police chief and tell him where he gets off. Leave it to me, there won’t be a cop around when the show starts.”

Leaving the dressing room, Norgil went to the telephone on the other side of the partition. The number that he gave belonged to the local police chief, and Norgil spoke it loud enough for Monte to hear. But the man who answered was Terry Dorcomb.

Lowering his voice, Norgil spoke a few sentences, then began to raise his tone. He did it artfully, as he had tested it with Fritz a while before, keeping a cautious note, yet letting it reach Monte’s ears.

“Listen, chief. . . .” Norgil seemed very earnest. “That was straight dope I sent you this afternoon. . . . Well, maybe they garbled it, so it’s time you got it right. . . . Yes, I’m on the level. . . .

“There’s a fellow here at the fairgrounds who is staging something phony. . . . Yes, for big dough. . . . Who is he? I’ll tell you that later, after I’m wise to the game. . . . All right, I’ll give you this much: It looks like blackmail. . . .

“Let me handle him. . . . Sure. You get the credit, just so we’ll be square. . . . Only get those flatfeet off the lot. . . . Yes. He’s seen them, and he’s leery. . . .”

Whistling softly to himself, Norgil strolled back into the dressing room. He scarcely glanced at Monte, who was lighting his cigarette. Norgil reached for collar and white tie, and began to put them on in front of the mirror.

"I talked to the police chief," he chuckled, "and I told him off. I reminded him that he had nothing on me, but that I can still raise a howl because he pinched me on the license matter. He ate dirt. Said he'd call in the cops right away. So everything is set, Monte."

From the reflection that the mirror gave, Norgil saw Monte rise, keeping his eyelids half closed in order to cover the quick darts of his beady eyes. He heard Monte's forced tone, as near normal as the fellow could make it.

"Glad you fixed it," said Monte, from the dressing room door. "That makes it jake. I'll see you later."

Monte Kyron had heard enough—just enough to suit Norgil's purpose. But enough, Norgil was confident, would prove too much for the Rochet Mob when Monte relayed the news to that band of crooks.

Chapter IV

THE TIGHT TRAP

THE CURTAIN call sounded a few minutes after Monte had left. Norgil hurried from the dressing room and spoke a few quick words to Fritz as they stood in the wing. Then the show was on, and Norgil, suave as ever, was making his first bow to a new audience.

The crowd was a little larger than in the afternoon, but still well-spaced, for this was a supper show, to attract those who arrived early at the fairgrounds. For once Norgil was pleased at the sight of a scattered audience. It wouldn't do to have the place packed, considering the climax that Norgil had arranged.

Monte would lose little time calling up the Rochet Mob.

Hearing that Norgil intended to double-cross them, they would have but one choice. That was to come here, in large force, and settle scores with the magician.

Subtly, Norgil had intimated—in Monte's hearing—that he thought the job was blackmail, not a ransom proposition. Duke Rochet and his crew would therefore be informed that they could strike without leaving clues that would lead to Alfred Landseer, the missing kidnap victim.

Such a stroke was what Norgil wanted—the very thing that Terry Dorcomb had hoped could be arranged. But during the early minutes of the act, Norgil could feel his collar wilting under perspiration that didn't come from the warm night air. He was tense, and with good reason.

When the mob arrived, he would have to scent it instantly. If they tried to grab him, things would not be bad, but Norgil had no guarantee that they would want him as a companion for Landseer. There was a large chance that the crooks might start shooting as soon as they invaded the Outdoor Theater.

That, at least, would mean a long-range fire which could allow the precious seconds that Norgil knew he would need later. He was ready for the risk, but it was racking during the twenty minutes that he allowed for the mob's arrival. The only way to handle that wait was to keep his mind on the show.

There were buzzes, here and there, upon the stage. Fritz was posting the other assistants, telling each person what to do when the pinch came. They were on the lookout, too, that loyal bunch, from the moment that they learned what Norgil was up against. He heard brief whispers of encouragement from each assistant who came near, and best of all was the confident smile that Miriam gave when she had penetrated the glass frame.

Miriam had no doubt of Norgil's prowess in emergency. Her look seemed to say that the larger the mob might be,

the more she would count upon Norgil to outwit them.

It happened almost as Norgil expected it. He was watching the audience, plain in the glow from the fairgrounds, which banished the gathered dusk. He was talking above the soft music of the orchestra and the calliopic strains of the distant carousel, when he saw men shouldering through the entrance, faces lowered, looking at their tickets.

They spread, taking to the grassy side aisles, to find benches near the front. Fritz was offstage, watching the rear door. Norgil heard it slam as someone shouted. Instantly he gave the cue for his own troupe to scramble.

Everyone dived from the stage, with the lone exception of Norgil. The crooks in the audience had heard the call; they were up from their benches, yanking guns. Norgil had his stage revolver, loaded with real slugs, but he didn't pull it in return. Instead, he made a seemingly bewildered dash for cover, choosing a cabinet that stood near the side of the stage.

The crooks reached the footlights just as the stage door battered open. The sight of the guns brought shrieks from the audience, but Duke Rochet and his eight followers didn't heed them. That cabinet looked like metal, too solid to riddle with bullets, but it would be no help for Norgil when they yanked the door open. He was as crazy as an ostrich, climbing inside there.

Before they reached the cabinet, it took a sudden roll across the stage. The crooks dodged it and saw Norgil as they did. He had gone right through the cabinet and was atop the ladder that stood in front of the big cannon that loomed toward the audience.

They had their target too briefly to take advantage. Norgil was not stopping on the ladder. His feet were already inside the cannon's wide-mouthed muzzle, and the slide he took into the long barrel was a rapid one. As he went, he gave the

ladder a side fling with one hand that sent it toppling toward the wing.

A gun spoke, fired by a crook who had come through the stage door. But he was ducking the ladder as he pulled the trigger. That bullet went wide. Other shots were better, but they didn't count. Norgil was out of sight within the cannon, and its sides were metal. Bullets clanged it and ricocheted.

"Grab that thing!"—Duke Rochet was bawling orders—"and tear it apart! Don't give him a chance to scam out of it!"

At the cannon, the crooks tried to haul it about, but it wouldn't move. Its wheels were clamped tight to the stage. They couldn't reach the high-pointed muzzle, for it was above their heads and hands. They were all around the cannon, though, and they could see a space beneath it.

It was impossible for Norgil to go out through the bottom. If he had some way of coming through the side, he would be squarely in the hands of his foemen. As for the muzzle, it was even worse. Not only was it covered by aimed revolvers, but two of Rochet's crew were setting up the ladder, ready to climb after the magician.

Norgil was in a tight trap of his own desperate making, one so snug that he could never come out of it alive, except to meet with instant death—at least, so the crooks reckoned. What they did not know about was the cord that ran down from the cannon through a tiny hole in the planking of the stage. Fritz had reached that cord. He was out of sight beneath the stage so that he could not see what was happening above. But Miriam was peering from a remote backstage corner. She gave Fritz his cue.

Fritz tugged the cord. Instead of a mere puff, the cannon emitted a voluminous roar that made the whole stage shake. With that burst the massive cylinder disgorged a volcanic flame, accompanied by a cloud of smoke. Staggering about, Rochet and his mob looked toward the muzzle, then beyond

it, while strange, new shouts rose from the audience.

Norgil was gone from the trap. Amid the inferno that belched from the cannon's mouth went the magician, bound on a rocketing journey. Away from the flame and smoke, he was scaling forty feet above the audience, clear from the clutches of the amazed crooks who held the stage alone!

Chapter V

THE DOUBLED GAME

NORGIL HAD become a human cannon ball!

Only two men in show business had previously performed that act. They were the Morrini Brothers, and they had shipped Norgil their cannon in answer to his telegram.

That special gun had accuracy with its power. When the Morrinis used it as a circus stunt, they nearly skimmed the roof of the big top. Gauged to the same range, Norgil was sailing at the height of a circus tent, above the heads of the audience in the Outdoor Theater.

Almost doubled in the air, he showed plainly against the glare from the fairgrounds, but sniping a speeding body at that height was too much for Rocket's marksmen. They didn't spy Norgil until he was in midair, and when they did aim, they could not calculate the rate of speed of that human projectile.

Those revolvers would have needed tracer bullets to be effective, and the sporadic fire offered little chance for second shots. While the crooks were uselessly pulling triggers, Norgil went from sight, clearing the high fence that surrounded the open-air show house.

The audience looked large enough to make trouble. Rocket

and his crew dashed out by the stage door, to double around the stockade and seize Norgil wherever he had landed. They were sure that his flight was as foolish as it was sensational, and they expected to find the magician a crippled hulk on the ground outside. Their surmise was partly due to the fact that the fence had prevented them from seeing the finish of Norgil's trip.

The crooks hadn't started from the stage when he landed, not on solid ground, but upon the wide mesh that made a backward slant in front of the Ten-in-One show. That background for the sideshow's banners was not a "transparency," as Norgil had described it. Shipped in with the huge cannon, it was part of the Morrini equipment, the net that the brothers used for their own landings in the circus tent.

Below the net, the fat barker was making a spiel from the ballyhoo platform when Norgil struck. Looking up, the fat man recognized the magician bouncing in the web. Straightened, Norgil slid down to the bally stand, pushed aside a couple of freaks and sprang to the ground beside the ticket booth. He was off, through the tent, before the Rochet mob came into sight.

Past the snakepit, Norgil rolled beneath the tent's rear wall. A coupe was waiting outside, its lights dim. The door swung open and Norgil clambered aboard. The car whizzed through a shortcut that led from the fairgrounds. Settling back in the seat, Norgil grinned toward Terry Dorcomb, who was at the wheel.

"Great work!" approved the Fed. "We'll get out to the farmhouse ahead of Rochet. By this time, the Flying Squad has probably made its raid."

Terry paused to swing the car along a highway that bore the route number "56." With the accelerator pedal flat to the floorboard, he listened to Norgil's account of the action on the stage. Terry was relieved to learn that no bystanders had been injured by gunfire.

"There wasn't time for accidents," explained Norgil. "It clicked like I said it would. The mob was after me, and still is. All that's left is to outrace them."

"Like they will do with the police," added Terry. "It was easy to place some local plainclothesmen at the fairgrounds, the sort who would be there anyway, watching the gyps. But we couldn't tip them off to what was up for fear there would be a leak."

The car was nearing the side road that led to the farmhouse. Terry tilted his head as he slackened speed. He heard no signs of motors from back along the road. Rochet and his mob had lost time getting to their cars. Silence from up ahead was also a good augury.

"They've raided," decided Terry, "which means the squad is inside the house. We'll pull up alongside of the screen trellis near the side porch, so they will know who we are. The mob always comes in by the back way—"

Terry was making the final turn as he broke off. The sudden rattle of guns was the sound that produced the interruption. The headlights showed a gawky figure dashing away from the farmhouse that sprawled blackish in the dull moonlight.

"The half-wit!" snapped Terry. "He must have spotted the raiding squad and queered things!"

Guns were spurting from bushes in front of the farmhouse. They represented the outspread Feds, and answering shots were coming from loopholes in barricaded windows. Norgil's next thought was the same as Terry's; it concerned the fate of Alfred Landseer. That raid could not safely be prolonged; trapped, the few defenders would murder their victim.

At that instant, Norgil saw the trellis that Terry had mentioned. It was only thirty feet ahead, right where the driveway turned. The magician had a sudden inspiration.

"Hit it!" he exclaimed. "Head on—and jam the brakes—"

Terry didn't catch the purpose at that moment, but he obeyed. The coupe rammed hard, bashing the slatted screen ahead of it. Thanks to the application of the brakes, the trellis did not shatter. Instead, it toppled ahead of the car. Norgil's next order was timed to that fall.

"Shift to second. Give her the gas—then brakes again!"

The screen had not completely flattened. Its top edge had reached the porch, above the level of the steps. Whining in second gear, the car took that slatted woodwork like a bridge. Terry recognized, by that time, exactly what Norgil expected. The Fed supplied it.

Hitting the porch, the coupe rode ahead. It struck the side door of the frame building and ripped the barrier completely away, carrying most of the door frame with it. Literally, the car was catapulted into the house just as effectively as Norgil had been projected over the stockade of the Outdoor Theater.

Instead of a net, Terry used brakes for the final stop. Amid a downpour of debris, the car halted near the rear wall of a large, dimly lighted living room, where the reserves of Rochet's crooked band were trying to protect their improvised stronghold.

Norgil's quick eyes spied a man, bound and gagged, in a corner chair. It was Landseer, and one of the defenders had a revolver trained upon the captive. But Norgil did not give a second thought to Landseer—for he saw another actor appear on the scene.

It was Pete Pellew, easily identified by the arm that he carried in a sling, which—as Norgil had previously conjectured—made him useful only as a reserve. Pete was supposed to be at a loophole, with a revolver, but he had been keeping his eye on Landseer.

The inside man was slugging when Norgil and Terry piled out of the car, and his stroke was straight for the crook who had covered Landseer. Norgil heard a thud; the blow had

landed. It was Pellew's turn to need protection, for he had declared himself. There were marksmen, three of them, swinging from the barred windows, all with the thought of getting Pellew first.

Shots echoed through that room. They came from Norgil's revolver. He had held it ready from the moment that the car had ripped through the door, and he handled that gun with a speed that the crooks could not match with their unwieldy rifles.

Two of them staggered, clipped at close range. Neither had a chance to fire, nor did the third man. He was on the other side of the car and had to prop his rifle across the radiator. Terry Dorcomb showed the benefit of ambidextrous training by winging him with a left-hand shot from a quickly drawn gun.

Like an echo came a pistol stab supplied by Pete Pellew, who had seen the first two waver and had concentrated upon the last man's direction. The crook was dead before his slide from the radiator carried him to the floor. The wounded two gave up when Norgil and Terry sprang around the car and covered them.

In from the shattered door came the raiding squad. With a speed that matched Norgil's rapid stage work, the Feds took over the stronghold as their own. Quick-given orders sent men to designated posts outside the house. All was set when the roar of motors announced the return of Rochet and his mob.

They had outdistanced the police and were ducking into their fortress, confident that they could hold it even if discovered. They had no idea that Norgil's trickery had been anything other than an arrangement with the Eastbury police. They had doubled the trail, only to find that the game had doubled, also.

The reception that they met was as short-lived as their

own careers. Tommy guns began an outpour from kitchen windows the moment that the crooks were at the back door. Some tried to run for it, only to be caught within an angled crossfire provided by the Feds who lay in outside ambush.

"Too bad I came along," was Norgil's comment to Terry Dorcomb. "If I hadn't, you chaps wouldn't be bothered with prisoners."

The comment was justified. Except for the two crooks that Norgil's quick shots had wounded, Duke Rochet and his entire mob had been wiped into oblivion. Terry, however, took a different view of Norgil's value.

"They would all be dead," he admitted grimly, "but so would Alfred Landseer and Pete Pellew. They have good reason to be glad you were in the picture."

Terry's car had been backed from the wrecked house wall. It had two mangled fenders and a leaky radiator, but was in good enough shape to be operated. Commenting that he would drive it into an Eastbury garage, Terry finished by turning suddenly to Norgil.

"I owe you a lot, too," reminded Terry. "If there's any favor I can do for you—"

"There's one," interposed Norgil, seriously, "and a very important one. You can drop me at the fairgrounds. There's another job I have to finish there."

"You mean Monte Kyron?" queried Terry. "Don't worry. We'll take care of him. You can forget him."

"I have already." Norgil's solemn look had changed to a smile. "The job I'm thinking about is my nine o'clock show."

Magician's Choice

ABOUT FIFTY years ago, when I was writing articles for Howard Thurston, then America's leading magician, he and I stopped backstage at the Garrick Theatre in Philadelphia to pick up his morning mail. With it was a package containing a few dozen blank cards, the size of playing cards but of varied thickness, so that Thurston could choose the weight he wanted to be printed with his picture and used as throw-out cards.

The stage was lighted sufficiently to show the empty theater as far as the front rows of the balcony, with the dim outline of the gallery above. So Thurston walked to the footlights and began scaling cards to an imaginary audience. Though he was nearly sixty years old he still had the strong overarm throw that could scale cards to the balcony and even the gallery, so he kept watching for those that traveled far enough before they fluttered.

Having decided upon which weight he wanted, he was about to lay the rest aside when he noted a few of extra thickness, perhaps three times as heavy as an ordinary playing card. Poising one between his fingers, he remarked, "Let's see how far this will go!" He swung his arm and the card cleared the gallery rail like an arrow, disappearing into the blackness beyond. Then from that void came an echoing clang that sounded like a sledgehammer banging a steel drum. It took us moments to realize that the card was still scaling at full speed when it hit the metal projection booth at the very top of the balcony!

I always felt that talent of that sort could serve some useful purpose, so a dozen years later, when I came to write the adventures of Norgil, I gave my fictional magician a dash of Thurston's skill.

Magician's Choice

Chapter I GHOSTS GAMBOL



HAT TIME IS it?" asked Norgil.

The table answered: "Tap—tap—tap—tap—tap."
"Five o'clock," interpreted Norgil. "The spirits have told us the hour. How many minutes is it after five o'clock?"

Eight obliging raps came from the table. Norgil smiled suavely at the group about the table. Hands forming a circle, with little fingers interlocked, they formed a human chain that included the magician. Yet those raps had come in a room where dim lights showed everyone, without a move from Norgil!

Lifting his hands, Norgil leaned back in his chair. The others did the same, taking positions more comfortable than the huddle around the table. They watched the magician raise the curtains to let daylight into the hotel room.

The seance was over. It had been baffling throughout, well worth the hundred dollars that these local businessmen had

pooled as a fee for Norgil's stunt of duplicating the amazing feats of pretended spirit mediums.

Norgil looked around the group and let a smile form beneath his pointed mustache.

Those raps from the table had them guessing even more than the slate messages that he had earlier produced. The raps were better, too, than the ghost face that had appeared while the room was completely dark. Yes, the raps were more than knocks. They were a knockout.

Of this group of seven men, three stood out. One was Carey Wadland, the home loan specialist: smug, fat-faced, with the expression of a contented cow. Another was Lynn Darvell, an insurance broker, whose habit was to rest his long chin between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, as though imitating Rodin's famous statue of "The Thinker."

Both had taken this seance very seriously; therefore, very curiously, both had been easy to deceive. It was the third standout of the group, Jacob Carn, who had given Norgil the most trouble.

Carn was an attorney, an ace at handling criminal cases. He had a half smile that never changed, and eyes that roved curiously, then fixed suddenly upon their object. When he sat with folded arms and sprang that fish gaze, even Norgil couldn't quite guess what was in the lawyer's mind.

"Sorry, gentlemen"—Norgil now started to draw his watch from his vest pocket, then let it slide back again, remembering the "spirits" had already told the time—"but it's getting late. I'm working two shows tonight, with an escape from a packing case as a special stunt. So I'll have to be getting ready. I'll see all of you later, won't I, at the theater?"

There were nods from the group. Then:

"We'll all be there," supplied Wadland. "I've hired a box for the first show. I've invited the whole party as my guests."

"We want to see the escape act," added Darvell, lifting his chin from his hand. "Years ago I saw Houdini do those stunts. I'm anxious to watch one again."

Carn, the lawyer, said nothing. He merely gave a flabby handshake, as half expressive as his smile, when he was leaving with the others.

Alone in the room, Norgil closed the transom but didn't bother to lock the door, for he was expecting Steve Cragey, his publicity man. His first act was to pick up a flat, circular ashtray that lay on a small stand near the table.

Inverting the ashtray, Norgil used a handkerchief to wipe off traces of a powder, so light that it seemed no more than thin dust. That stuff was luminous in the dark, and against the green glass of the ashtray, it had made an excellent spirit face when Norgil had brandished it about.

The only man who had noted the ashtray afterward was Jacob Carn, but he had looked at about everything in the room. It wasn't likely that Carn had caught on to the stunt.

The telephone bell began to ring while Norgil was changing to his dress suit, which he frequently put on before dinner when he was to do an early show. It was Steve Cragey on the wire; the press agent was busy, so he wouldn't be up. He told Norgil he would see him at the theater later.

Norgil began to take articles from his business suit and put them in the pockets of his dress clothes. His wallet, his keys, his watch—finally the little cardboard box that contained the luminous powder. He was struggling into a dress suit that reminded him of a straitjacket he was going to wear tonight, when the telephone made another interruption.

This time, the voice was a strange one. It was timid at first, but gradually the feeble tone became persistent. The speaker introduced himself as a jeweler named Nathaniel Tolland, and he had something to say that interested Norgil.

"They are very fine gems," he declared. "Antiques, Mr.

Norgil, that I have kept for years. I would never think of selling them except to a man of your reputation."

"I'd like to see them," returned Norgil. "Suppose I drop around tomorrow?"

"I'm going away tonight," said Tolland. "Though I shall return in a few days, I would prefer that you should see the stones before I go. They are very fine, Mr. Norgil"—the tone became plaintive—"and I would not show them to everyone."

Norgil calculated. Skipping dinner would not be a hardship, particularly with a strenuous escape act coming afterward. He could spare the time, as Tolland wanted, and do with a sandwich and a cup of coffee at the one-arm lunchroom behind the theater.

"Very well," agreed Norgil. "Give me the address. I'll be right over."

The jeweler gave the number and Norgil wrote it on a slip of paper, one of the sheets he used in a "spirit message" stunt that had perplexed his recent visitors. Funny, thought Norgil, how completely that trick had fooled Wadland, Darvell, Carn and the rest. Perhaps some of them actually believed in spooks!

A moment later, Norgil's own opinions were inclining toward the supernatural. He was staring hard and steadily at the door of the room. In that door was the room key; from it dangled the long, oval plate that bore the room number, a common sight on most hotel keys.

But that long tab wasn't hanging motionless. It was swinging, back and forth, with the motion of a silent pendulum. As Norgil watched it, the thing continued its rhythmic sway, as though touched constantly by an invisible hand.

Perhaps the key tab was in tune with the vibration of the building. That would account for its continued swing—but what had started it? Norgil was still wondering when the tab wavered to a slow stop.

Remembering his appointment, Norgil pulled the key from the lock. Stepping from the room, he locked the door from the other side. But as he strode along the corridor, he still kept thinking of the key.

Norgil, the man who manufactured ghosts, was actually harboring the curious notion that perhaps the spooks were having a laugh at him!

Chapter II

CRIME FORESHADOWED

THE ADDRESS where the taxicab took Norgil was that of a small two-story house, nestled in a row. It wasn't the sort of home where one would expect to find a jeweler, but Norgil began to understand matters when he met Tolland.

Admitted to the house, Norgil faced a man who was obviously a recluse. Dry-faced, elderly, shy and trembling in manner, Tolland looked weary of the world. His eyes, however, expressed something of a pathetic beam when he recognized Norgil.

Tolland took the magician to a little library, where ponderous, well-worn books lined the wall shelves. The old man explained that he spent all his spare time here, after finishing working hours in his tiny downtown store.

He had seen Norgil's photograph in a newspaper and with it a press story that mentioned Norgil's interest in jewels. Producing the clipping, Tolland showed it to his visitor.

Norgil wondered how that story had appeared in the local newspaper. It was an old one that he hadn't used for years. Perhaps someone had clipped it from an old newspaper and sent it in to the local sheet. Steve Craggy

certainly hadn't placed it.

"I must be careful"—old Tolland was speaking in a fearful tone—"very careful. Many attempts have been made to find my rare gems by persons who seek to steal them. Crime lurks deep in this city, Mr. Norgil!"

The comment brought a smile from Norgil. Noting the expression, Nathaniel Tolland wagged a bony forefinger.

"You have read of petty crime here," declared the jeweler, "and that is all. But I tell you, it is camouflage. Crime is deep, and behind it"—he tapped his forefinger to his forehead—"there is a master brain. Some man, high in public esteem, is the hidden ruler. And he—" Tolland's tone became hoarse with awe. "He works his greatest evil alone!"

Norgil began to show interest. Observing it, Tolland specified instances. Most of them related to his jewelry store, where he had noted scratches on the rear door, smudge marks on the safe, dust disturbed on floorboards behind the counter, all on different occasions.

"He is hunting, hunting, hunting!" Tolland's eyes looked wild as he described his mysterious persecutor. "Always for the rare gems that he knows are mine. But he has never guessed"—the old man clucked artfully—"that I keep them here. I tell you that, Mr. Norgil, because I know that I can trust you."

Taking Norgil's arm, Tolland urged him from the little library. For the next few minutes, the magician paced the hall outside the closed door. When Tolland invited him in again, a small box was resting, open, on the library table.

Tolland had probably produced the box from a cache behind a bookshelf. Though his fears for his treasure might be imaginary, the jewels themselves were decidedly real. The small box fairly glittered with golden rings, bracelets, locketts and other heirlooms, all studded with valuable gems.

One ring, set with a ruby, caught Norgil's immediate

admiration. He wanted it, and the price that Tolland named was fair. But it happened to be more money than Norgil had with him, and the magician could not resist the desire to take the ring along. That was when the idea struck him.

Norgil brought his watch from his pocket. It was an old-fashioned timepiece, its thick case made of heavy gold. The works, it happened, were of modern manufacture, but Tolland did not bother to examine them. The case was an antique easily worth the difference between Norgil's cash and the ruby ring.

Accepting the watch as security for the balance of the payment, Tolland put it in the box with the rest of his treasures. Norgil went out into the hallway and admired the glitter of the ruby while Tolland was putting his well-filled jewel case back in its hiding place.

Norgil's taxi was waiting outside, so the magician invited Tolland to ride with him to the station. The jeweler was going to visit his niece in a town less than an hour's ride away. He had plenty of time to catch his train, so Norgil told the taxi driver to take the trip easily.

From the moment that they pulled away from the house, Norgil began to weigh Tolland's fears seriously.

Dusk had arrived, and people along the street had a shifty way of keeping from sight. Moreover, a policeman at the corner showed a most vigilant concern toward everyone who passed. He gazed suspiciously at the taxi when it stopped at the crossing, and had ample opportunity to notice both its passengers.

By the time they had reached the depot, Norgil was convinced that Tolland's house would be a natural target for crooks, should they learn of its precious contents: a particularly easy spot for a shrewd, lone worker to enter without risking his high social status—providing, of course, that there was such a crook in town.

Those jewels of Tolland's were easily worth fifty thousand dollars, and the old man claimed he had shown them to no one. How simple it would be for a smart crook to fence them at nearly one hundred percent profit!

Lighted streets ended Norgil's qualms. After all, Tolland had kept those gems at his house for years, and they had never been touched. Why disturb the old man's peace of mind just before he started on a trip?

Norgil had enough matters of his own to worry about this evening, with the packing-case escape scheduled at the finish of the first show. It was time, too, to be getting to the theater. So he forgot Tolland, to a great degree, as soon as he had seen a porter carry the old jeweler's bags into the station.

One hour later, Norgil was in the middle of his show. Rabbits were popping out of hats and girls were vanishing from cabinets in rapid fashion, as they always did when the magician was at his best. It was when he stepped offstage for a fifteen-second interval that Norgil's sleeve was plucked by one of the vanished girls.

It was Miriam, the brunette who should, at this moment, be getting into another costume for the Buzzsaw Illusion. Before Norgil could gesture her away, Miriam spoke news.

"Some woman just called up," said Miriam hurriedly. "I took the call at the backstage phone. She said you know her uncle, Nathaniel Tolland—"

"How did she know that?" snapped Norgil quickly.

"Somebody called her by long distance," replied Miriam, "and said you had taken him to the station. But he didn't arrive on the train as she expected. I told her you were doing a show, so she's calling the police—"

The orchestra blared the cue for Norgil's entry. Without a word the magician strode on stage to begin his act of plucking cigarettes from nowhere. The bow that he made

was mechanical; his deft fingers started their manipulations through sheer habit.

For Norgil's mind was not upon the act, the music or the audience. One thought alone controlled him. Crime had struck, with Nathaniel Tolland as its victim.

Crime that some master crook, as clever as Tolland had depicted him, intended should be borne by Norgil!

Chapter III

WANTED FOR MURDER

WHILE LIGHTED cigarettes appeared like glowing fireflies at Norgil's fingertips, the magician's mind was groping back along a chain of incidents to strike at last upon the key to the whole situation.

An appropriate key, too, because it involved an actual key, the one that locked and unlocked Norgil's hotel room.

Norgil's teeth bit hard upon a cigarette as he gave it a few puffs. He had been so concentrated on the spook stuff that he had overlooked the obvious when he watched the key tab perform its wigwag.

That pendulum swing had been started by someone who had sneakily opened the door while Norgil was talking over the telephone to Tolland. The eavesdropper had learned that the magician intended to visit the jeweler.

Though the unknown listener had closed the door as neatly as he had opened it, he had also added to the momentum of the key tab. The clue had remained, signaling away to Norgil, who had completely missed its significance.

Who had been the silent eavesdropper?

Out of the dimness that formed the theater audience,

Norgil saw the outline of a balcony box; he made out three faces most conspicuous in the group that thronged it.

He noted Carey Wadland, his fat face bulging above the collar of a dress shirt. Beside him was Lynn Darvell, with an elbow on the balcony rail, chin buried in his supporting hand. In a corner of the box, leaning back with arms folded, sat Jacob Carn, wearing the imitation smile that looked as though it had been painted on his face.

One of those three could be the man behind the crooked game. It was easy to picture any one of them visiting Tolland's house after the jeweler had left with Norgil. The trouble was that Norgil could not make an immediate choice between them.

He was worried, too, about Tolland's disappearance, but Norgil gained enlightenment on that matter as he finished the cigarette act and went into the Penetration Illusion. In that trick, Miriam passed through a sheet of plate glass, from a screen at the back to a similar screen in front.

As Norgil helped his trim assistant from the platform that fronted the big glass, Miriam undertoned more news. Police were at the stage door, and they had come here on account of Nathaniel Tolland. The old jeweler had been found, shot through the heart, in the middle of his little library.

So Tolland had gone back to the house! Norgil remembered that the old chap had been muttering about something he had forgotten. Probably he had decided to return home and take a later train. Ill luck had brought him back in time to meet the jewel thief, who had thereupon turned murderer.

No wonder the police were here. A taxi driver, a cop on the corner, a station porter—all had probably testified that Norgil was the last person to be seen with the murdered jeweler!

A few more tricks and the act would be over, except for the packing-case escape, which was to be preceded by a short

intermission. But as Norgil neared the finale, he learned that he wasn't going to do the packing-box escape. The police—they were at both wings of the stage by this time—intended to arrest Norgil as soon as he stepped off.

They had let that fact drop, not knowing that Miriam was close enough to hear it. She, in turn, relayed the word to Norgil. Obliging of the police, giving him a few minutes more! Probably they didn't want to cause too much commotion in the theater. Maybe, though, those few minutes could be used.

Norgil was doing some card manipulations while the stage was being set for the quick-change illusion that would finish the show. Miriam was holding a tray as they stood before the front drop. His lips motionless, Norgil gave low-voiced orders that only Miriam could hear.

"Tell Fritz to open the trunk with the quick-change costumes," he said. "Have him set costume number six, so I can get it—with a screen in front of the trunk."

There was a nod from Miriam as a dozen cards disappeared from Norgil's upsweeping hand. The cards were reappearing, one by one, at his fingertips. He added:

"And get me a stack of throw-out cards. On one of them, write this message—"

His head tilted slightly, Norgil whispered the words close to Miriam's ear. She felt his elbow nudge her as he turned toward the audience. Miriam went offstage.

Killing time with some card flourishes, Norgil let his eyes rove over the audience. His gaze went past the box that held the local businessmen; he scanned the balcony in vain. At last, he saw the person he wanted: Steve Craggy, seated in an isolated section of the gallery.

Norgil's publicity man frequently chose a spot like that, as it gave him a chance to watch the show from an angle where mistakes were most visible. Afterward, Steve gave reports

of any slips that he had witnessed so that Norgil could correct them.

Tonight, Steve was to have a more important duty. Norgil needed someone who could reach the stage door from the outside, to help trick the invading officers. Norgil was wanted for a murder of which he was innocent, but it would be difficult to convince a hard-boiled police chief. Given time, though, he might be able to produce the goods that would clear him. Steve's aid was essential to the scheme.

Miriam was back with the throw-out cards. They were the size of playing cards, but heavier, and they bore Norgil's photograph. Announcing that they were good-luck souvenirs, Norgil began to skim the cards into the audience.

He cued the orchestra to a faster tune. Excitement increased as Norgil propelled the cards, like driving arrows, farther and farther from the stage. They were reaching the balcony, those swift-scaling missives, and people were grabbing for them everywhere.

Norgil's arm began a longer swing that ended with piston snaps from his wrist. Gasps of awe came from the audience; bursts of applause followed. Norgil was driving those thin pasteboards clear up to the second balcony!

He kept grimly at it while the house rocked with hand-claps. There was reason for Norgil's grimness. Steve had tired of his sojourn with the gallery gods and was starting up the steep aisle toward the projection booth.

Shades of Herrmann and Thurston, famous for their skill as card throwers, were with Norgil as he drove a long-distance barrage toward his departing press agent. He clipped his human target with three cards out of four, and the last one caught Steve just below the ear.

Instinctively annoyed, Steve turned. He saw Norgil glance at the cards in his own hand, so he looked at the one that had just hit him. Steve understood what Norgil wanted. From

the bottom of the stack, the magician drew the card that bore the message. He gave it a long, high throw.

The toss was perfect. The card took a flutter almost at the projection booth and fell on a seat from which Steve grabbed it. The press agent read the card and hurried out. With a grin of relief, Norgil flipped the remaining cards in a cluster to the patrons just beyond the orchestra.

The police were here to arrest a man for murder, but if the rest of the scheme went well, that man would not be Norgil!

Chapter IV

NORGIL'S INTERLUDE

BLUE UNIFORMS were visible at the wings of the stage when Norgil turned and gave the cue for the curtains to open. The police had begun to think that the card throwing was a stall. But when they saw the curtains spread apart, they decided to bide their time.

The finale was a quick succession of transformations. Norgil placed Miriam in a cabinet; he fired a pistol, and the girl was gone. A hanging box began to shake on the chains that suspended it. Ignoring the box, Norgil stepped into the cabinet that Miriam had vacated.

Fritz stepped on stage, attired in a robe topped by a devil's head, and fired a pistol of his own. The hanging box dropped open; inside it was Miriam! A surprising transposition, but one that the audience expected. They weren't ready, though, for the rest of it.

The man in devil's attire yanked open the cabinet door. This time, Norgil had vanished. Eyes went toward the hanging box, but the magician didn't arrive there. Instead, the devil-clad

assistant whisked off his robe and doffed the Mephisto head.

Wonder of wonders, it was Norgil! Incredible though it was, the magician had seemingly vanished himself—by playing two roles at once!

Norgil was bowing while the curtains closed. He shot glances toward the wings, then to a screen that Fritz had set in a corner near the dressing rooms. The police were over their bewilderment; they were closing in on Norgil, two from each wing, with another pair guarding the stage door, his only possible exit.

At first, they received a quiet look of inquiry. Lulled, they started to tell Norgil why they wanted him. An instant later he had sprung about and was away, off to the corner where the screen stood. With a shout the police officers sprang after him.

Fritz and other assistants blundered into them. Shaking clear, the officers neared the screen with drawn revolvers. The screen was shoved at them; they tangled with it. There was a sprawl of cops around an open trunk that bulged with costumes—but there was no sign of Norgil among those blue uniforms.

The last two officers had pounced in from the stage door. They saw one of their flattened comrades come to hands and knees, his cap twisted downward half across his eyes. The fellow gave a wild gesture, pointing past them. He yelled:

“There he goes! For the door!”

The policemen whirled about. They didn’t glimpse Norgil, but they heard the roar of a starting motor out in the darkened alleyway. They headed for the sound. The rest of the police scrambled to their feet and followed. By the time the fleeing car had swept from the alley, two patrol cars were starting a pursuit.

Six bluecoats had gone out through the stage door, but, oddly, one remained. He was the one who had shouted to the

others, yet had failed to follow them. He was standing by the costume trunk, pulling zippers at the sides of his coat and trousers. His uniform fell apart; he tossed his cap with it.

The extra cop was Norgil. Behind the screen, he had actually dived into a special costume that was ready for him. Costume No. 6 was a policeman's uniform!

Steve Cragey had done his bit. He had reached his car that he always parked in the alley. He was leading the real police on a blind chase. Steve's car was fast, and he could keep them occupied for the next half hour.

That was the interlude on which Norgil's next moves depended.

Stepping to a dressing room, Norgil took off his dress suit and began to put on an assistant's uniform, while Fritz was standing by, much puzzled.

"What about the packing-case escape?" questioned Fritz. "They're waiting for it out front. You can't work it in that outfit, boss. That is—if you're *going* to work it."

"I'm doing the escape," assured Norgil. "Get me a pair of overalls to cover this uniform."

Fritz nodded. Norgil often worked his escapes in overalls. Then Fritz had another objection.

"You were going to have them put you in a straitjacket," he said. "You can't use the jacket with overalls."

"The jacket is out," said Norgil. "We'll work with handcuffs and leg irons instead."

Fritz brought the overalls. Norgil filled their copious pockets with articles from his dress suit and went on stage, while Fritz was getting the handcuffs and manacles. By the time Norgil had reached the stage, he was holding back a grin.

In going through his own pockets, he had just remembered the watch that he had left with Tolland. A lucky recollection, for it inspired his next move. There was a chance—and a

good one—that the jewel thief still had the purloined gems on his person.

Why not?

The murderer couldn't have had time to detour while coming from Tolland's to the theater. The last thing he could expect would be an accusation, for he had beautifully shoved suspicion onto Norgil. As for the gems, only two persons could identify them. One was Tolland, and he was dead. The other was Norgil, the one man suspected of the murder.

In a pinch, the killer could claim that the jewels were his own, and his word would be as good as anyone's. But the watch would be among those valuable antique pieces, and the man who now had it couldn't know that it actually belonged to Norgil.

That watch, moreover, could serve in more than one way. It was going to help matters a very great deal if Norgil's hopes held good.

From the stage, Norgil announced that he was ready for the packing-box escape and that he would require the assistance of a committee from the audience. Eying the spectators as he spoke, he gained new confidence as he noted the balcony box.

None of the three—Wadland, Darvell or Carn—had guessed that Norgil had just sent away a squad of visiting police. Wadland was as smug as ever; Darvell still had his chin in his hand; while Carn was for once betraying an expression that looked very much like boredom.

The murderer—if he proved to be one of those three—had not yet learned that theft and death had been discovered. He was simply biding his time until the show was over, when he could bury his swag.

Men were coming along the aisles, up the steps to the stage, but the committee wasn't large enough to suit Norgil.

He looked up toward the box and beckoned.

"Three more gentlemen," he insisted. "Those three—in the front row of the box. Will you oblige us by coming to the stage?"

All showed signs of hesitation; then, as Norgil still persuaded, they finally agreed. They left the box and started a roundabout trek from the balcony to the orchestra. Near the runway, Norgil waited, a welcoming smile upon his lips.

Behind that bland pose lay keen calculation. Within the next few minutes, Norgil intended to pick out a murderer!

Chapter V ONE MAN MISSING

AS EACH man reached the stage, Norgil received him with a handshake, then looked around for vacant chairs among those taken by earlier members of the large committee. The chairs were arranged in a wide semicircle, with a center space that ended at a lowered curtain. Fortunately the vacancies were wide apart.

Norgil conducted Wadland to a chair near the left end of the line. Other committee members didn't look pleased when he arrived there. Perhaps they were chaps who were paying six percent a month on loans from Wadland's company.

Darvell was next. Norgil found him a chair near the center. No one seemed to mind the arrival of the insurance broker, and Darvell did not bother to notice those about him. He sat with elbow on his knee, chin in his hand, interested as usual in whatever was coming next.

For Carn, Norgil chose the right end of the semicircle. Folding his arms, the attorney threw a cold-eyed stare along

the line. He was interested in the faces of this oddly assorted committee, numbering about two dozen. His smile seemed to indicate recognition. Possibly some of the crowd were local malefactors that Carn had formerly represented in court. Experience had told Norgil that thugs frequently crowded into those committees, provided they weren't wanted by the law.

Most important, however, was Norgil's latest link with the past. He was thinking of his spook show that afternoon, when his pretended spirits rapped out the time of day. Norgil's mind was imbued with faint echoes of those spirit knocks. The ghosts—his own ghosts—were giving him a message.

The spooks, imaginary though they were, had named the man that Norgil wanted—the murderer of Nathaniel Tolland!

Minutes were getting short, but Norgil did not hurry. He gave a leisurely snap of his fingers; the curtain rose to show a large, square cabinet with solid top and cloth-draped sides that hung to the floor. The front curtain of the cabinet was open. Inside stood the stout packing case that had been built by a local lumber company.

Fritz and other uniformed assistants dragged the packing case forward. Norgil asked committee members to examine it, along with its loose, flat top. He explained that holes drilled in the packing case were merely for air, and suggested that they be given special inspection.

Dipping his hands in the pockets of his overalls, Norgil removed their contents and gave them to Fritz to carry away. He wanted to convince everyone that he carried no tools that could help him out of the packing case.

Among the things that Norgil took from his pocket was a small round cardboard box. The top came off it, but Norgil caught the falling lid before the contents could spill. The cardboard box went away with the other items. Men were still hammering the packing case when Fritz returned with

the handcuffs and leg irons. He also brought the keys that unlocked the manacles.

Fritz was the only person on the stage who realized that Norgil was elated over something. He figured that Norgil had found the man he wanted—and that far, Fritz was right. What he didn't guess was the fact that of the three, the guilty man was the one best suited to Norgil's needs.

There was a way to handle him that would not apply to the others, and it had come to Norgil as another inspiration. One chance in three, and it had landed—the first real luck that Norgil had found tonight.

Taking the handcuffs, Norgil gave them to Carey Wadland, whose fat face immediately lost traces of its contentment. The loan merchant didn't like the looks of the things. Next, Norgil gave a pair of keys to Lynn Darvell, telling the insurance man to hold them. Norgil passed the leg irons to Jacob Carn. The attorney promptly began to inspect them, link by link.

After the examination, Norgil gathered handcuffs, irons and keys, and placed them in Fritz's custody. Wadland looked relieved. Darvell resumed his intent, forward-leaning pose, while Carn sat back and watched with his irksome smile.

The committeemen had finished thumping the box. Norgil invited some of them inside the large cabinet and requested others to come along. Among the latter were Wadland, Darvell and Carn. A full dozen men entered the wide-walled cabinet and looked about the interior.

Norgil waited until the three important men were crowded deep into the cabinet. He turned toward the audience and gave a wise wink. Stepping into the cabinet, he suddenly whisked the curtain shut.

Startled mutters came from the men inside. They didn't like the sudden darkness. They heard Norgil reassuring them:

"It's a comedy stunt—hear the laugh that's coming from

the audience? Don't yank the curtain open. Just pile out through it in a big hurry."

Grumbles changed to chuckles. Men began to shove past Norgil, ducking to go beneath the curtain. No one was visible in that darkness, but Norgil wasn't looking for a face. He was watching for a spot of light, and he saw it—a glow about the size of a quarter dollar.

Shoving his elbow toward the curtain, Norgil cleared the space he wanted. Fist doubled tight, he gave a solid punch for that approaching spot of glow. His fist stopped with a shock that numbed his knuckles. The luminous disk disappeared, followed by a slumpy thud near the rear wall of the cabinet.

No one heard that thump except Norgil; the rest were making too much noise as they scuffled through the curtain. Even the man who took the punch was oblivious to his tumble. He was minus his senses at the moment he collapsed.

One from a dozen was not a noticeable subtraction when the committee members had floundered from the cabinet. The comedy had set the audience in hysterics. And the men who had provided the fun were sheepish and self-conscious—too much so to think of one another.

Stepping past the edge of the curtain, Norgil was the last man from the cabinet. He placed the lid across the packing case and perched there while the handcuffs and leg irons were locked on his wrists and ankles.

"Don't pull the curtain," he undertoned to Fritz. "Just slide the packing case in under it. Don't let anybody get a look inside."

Fritz nodded. He tilted the lid, sliding Norgil into the packing case, where the manacles clattered as he landed. The lid was put in place; husky committeemen set to work with hammers and big nails, hoping to fix it so tight that Norgil could not get out.

Propped inside, Norgil shifted his eye from one air hole to another, looking for two men who had come from the balcony box. He saw both of them, and they were interested solely in the nailing of the box. Even those two did not suspect what had happened inside the cabinet.

One of three men was missing—and no one but Norgil knew it!

Chapter VI MURDER'S TRAIL

THE ORCHESTRA had repeated one tune for the seventh time, while the smirking committeemen watched the cabinet on the stage. They took pleasure, those fellows who had nailed the box, in the anxious looks of Norgil's assistants.

Standing on each side of the cabinet, Fritz and the other boys didn't appear so natty in their bright red uniforms. They were sweating inside those monkey suits, wondering why Norgil didn't make his escape. He had never failed before.

There was a commotion at the stage door. It ended abruptly. On from the wing stalked a man in a uniform that was blue instead of red. He raised both hands and motioned for the orchestra to stop its racket. The audience came forward to the edges of their chairs.

The beefy man in blue was the local police chief—and whatever he was here for, he meant business!

In from the stage door came a pair of cops. Others of the police chief's squad appeared at the back of the theater. The chief bawled for everyone to hold their seats. No reason for alarm, he shouted. The audience quieted.

Looking at the cabinet, the police chief snapped questions

that were promptly answered. His beefy face showed pleasure.

"So he's in there, eh?" said the chief. "Locked with handcuffs and leg irons? Nailed inside a packing case? That's great. We've got him right where we want him—the man who killed Nathaniel Tolland."

With a sweep of his arm, the chief ordered his men to haul the big cloth cabinet away. Norgil's assistants sprang to do it for them. They were in and out of the cabinet before the officers could stop them. The police chief bellowed; his men piled in and shoved the assistants aside.

Again, no one thought of counting noses. There were five men in red uniforms when the police went after them, but there were six when they were hauled from the cabinet and huddled at one side of the stage.

Nor did the officers look at faces. They were too eager to demolish the cabinet. They pulled it apart and scattered its parts aside. Grabbing hammers, they ripped open the packing case that stood on the bare stage as solidly nailed as ever.

With the lid completely gone, the police tilted the packing case forward. Out sprawled its occupant with a clatter of the manacles that bound him. They couldn't see his face at first, for it was covered with a mass of blue cloth that turned out to be a pair of overalls.

It was the police chief who whipped away those loose overalls while he shouted his declaration:

"We've got you—"

He didn't finish with Norgil's name. Instead, he blinked with amazed recognition. The half-smothered prisoner was one of the town's best citizens—Lynn Darvell, the insurance broker!

Angrily, the police chief shouted for the keys. One of the committeemen had them and passed them over. While the chief was unlocking Darvell, two men elbowed up beside him.

"This is an outrage!" began Carey Wadland. The loan merchant was filled with honest indignation at Darvell's plight. "Whatever has happened, Darvell can explain it all—"

"I'm not so sure that he can," inserted Jacob Carn. There was suspicion in the lawyer's half smile. "Perhaps Norgil can give us more information."

"Norgil?" demanded the police chief. "Where is he?"

"Over there."

Norgil stepped forward as Carn spoke. He came from his own clustered assistants, wearing a uniform like theirs. He gave a smile of acknowledgment to Carn, then motioned toward Darvell with the question:

"Why not search him?"

The police chief answered the suggestion by following it. Darvell's pockets looked empty, but they weren't. From his inside pockets came a handful of antique rings with sparkling jewels; from the tails of his dress coat, the larger items—bracelets, brooches and a watch!

Wavering to his feet, Darvell found his voice, to mouth a plea of innocence. Someone had punched him while he was in the cabinet, he argued, and had planted the swag on him.

"It was Norgil!" he panted. "He stole this stuff from Tolland!"

"Including my own watch?" asked Norgil.

The question stumped Darvell. Norgil opened the back of the watch and displayed his name, engraved inside the case. It took Darvell ten seconds to find an alibi for that.

"You planted the watch, too," he began. "Anyway, you went to Tolland's."

"Of course," purred Norgil. "I left the watch as security for a ring I purchased. You didn't know that, did you, Darvell?"

As he spoke, Norgil looked toward Carn, hoping that the shrewd attorney would catch another inference. Carn did. He put a blunt question to Darvell.

"Tell us," suggested the lawyer, "just how you happened to know that Norgil visited Tolland? I didn't know it, nor did Wadland, and you were here at the theater with us—"

Darvell interrupted with a maddened shout. It brought response from men who were on the stage and others in the audience. Old Tolland was right. The city had a master crook—Lynn Darvell—and he owned a mob. A dozen of his thugs were in the theater.

It was Norgil who supplied salvation as the hoodlums overwhelmed the police with the surprise attack. He shouted to the electrician and gave a gesture toward the projection booth. The stage lights went off. Only the spotlight remained. A moment later that spotlight had undergone a transformation.

The man in the projection booth was spinning a blinker in front of it. The stage was flicked with alternate flashes of light and darkness. The fighters were bewildered by that kaleidoscopic light that made everything appear in slow motion.

All except Norgil and his assistants. To them, that blinking illumination was no novelty. They had used it often in the show and they took advantage of it in this crisis. They bobbed up everywhere as capably as if it had been daylight, slinging crooks to right and left.

The blinks ended. The police found themselves in control. They looked for Lynn Darvell and saw the murderer flat upon the stage. Norgil was rising from beside him, but Darvell did not get up. The handcuffs were again on his wrists, and Norgil had clamped the shackles to the killer's legs.

It was Jacob Carn who had some questions after Lynn Darvell and his mob had been taken away. They were in Norgil's dressing room, and the lawyer indulged in a genuine smile when he asked:

"How did you manage it?"

For reply, Norgil showed Carn the watch that Darvell had found at Tolland's. He told the lawyer to listen. Carn noted muffled clicks whenever the magician gave the watch a slight tilt.

"Watch," said Norgil with a smile.

He pressed the watch against the dressing table. The clicks became sharper; they were like knocks coming from the woodwork. Norgil lifted the watch. Opening the thin inner case, he showed Carn the special mechanism.

"Those raps this afternoon!" exclaimed the lawyer. "They were magnified clicks from the watch! And tonight you knew that whoever carried that watch would be identified if you listened closely! That's why you took each of us to a chair when we came on the stage!"

Norgil nodded. He knew the next question even before Carn asked it. The lawyer wanted to know how he had settled Darvell so neatly in the cabinet.

"When I knew it was Darvell," the magician answered, "I dabbed some luminous powder on the keys before I handed them to him. I hadn't forgotten Darvell's constant habit of propping his chin in his hand."

"That's right!" exclaimed Carn. "He marked his jaw himself! And you saw that dab of glow when you darkened the interior of the cabinet!"

"Exactly." Norgil nodded. "It looked like a button. That's where I hit Darvell. Right on the button."

Carn arose and extended his hand. This time his clasp was anything but flabby. He remarked that he was going to police headquarters, but that he did not intend to handle Darvell's case. On the contrary, he would be highly pleased if he could perform any favor for Norgil.

"You can do me a great favor," replied Norgil seriously. He handed Carn a pair of keys. "Take these to the police chief, so he can unlock Darvell."

“And then”—the magician finished the request with a smile—“ask the chief to send back the handcuffs and the leg irons. I need them with my show!”

Old Crime Week

THERE IS a street in the city of Blois, France, which bears the sign RUE ROBERT-HOUDIN in honor of the most famous of French conjurers. The main street of Colon, Michigan, is named BLACKSTONE AVENUE after the last of America's great stage magicians. Marshalltown, Iowa, was a Mecca for visiting magicians during the lifetime of T. Nelson Downs, after he retired in his home town as the celebrated "King of Koins" whose manipulative magic was unsurpassed.

The Great Raymond was making Akron, Ohio, famous in his travels around the globe before the automobile tire industry had begun to make itself as widely known. Whenever Howard Thurston appeared in his home city of Columbus, Ohio, with the biggest magic show ever, he doubled his billboard advertising to let everybody know that he was there. The citizens of Indiana, Pennsylvania, knew that Bill Neff had come home with his midnight spook show after a successful season when they saw a truck rolling through the streets decorated with assorted ghosts and skeletons that fitted with the sign: DOCTOR NEFF'S MADHOUSE OF MYSTERY.

In Odessa, Missouri, Joe Lightner, a local magician, ran for mayor, and somebody said that when the ballot box was opened a live rabbit popped out to announce Joe as the winner. Since that adds a touch of fiction to the facts already stated, it is only fitting that Norgil, as a fictional magician, should have had a home town adventure, so here it is!

Old Crime Week

Chapter I NORGIL COMES HOME

IT WAS OLD Home Week in Westbury, and big banners stretched everywhere along the streets, welcoming the native sons who were returning to the town of their birth.

Plastered upon other walls were bill posters that carried the name and picture of Norgil the Magician, who was to appear in person at the Star Theater as the main attraction during this week of celebration.

Norgil compared banners and posters as he rode from the railway station to the theater. A smile flickered upon the suave lips beneath the magician's pointed mustache.

What a tie-up it would be if Norgil could announce that he, the visiting celebrity, was one of the homecomers!

Perhaps Norgil would make that very announcement before this week was ended. For the present, however, he preferred to be regarded as a stranger. Therefore he repressed his smile and nodded blandly as the man beside him pointed out the sights of Westbury.

Norgil's companion was Morton Rowden, prominent local businessman. Portly, middle-aged, with smooth and roundish features, Rowden represented the conservatism that long had ruled Westbury. Among others of his class, however, Rowden was known as a go-getter.

It was Rowden who, as chairman of the Home Week Committee, had struck upon the happy idea of reopening the old Star Theater and engaging Norgil as the feature performer.

When Rowden's car stopped in the street behind the theater, Norgil said to Rowden:

"I'll be in my dressing room. Come on back after you've finished your business in the front office. If you see that new secretary of mine, Judreck, send him along. Tell him to bring any mail."

Entering the stage door, Norgil found the place deserted. It was late afternoon; his assistants, finished with the unpacking, had evidently gone out to eat.

Norgil opened a door which bore a star and stepped into the dusk-filled dressing room. From that moment, he no longer lacked a welcome in his home town—but it wasn't the sort of greeting that he had expected.

The welcome came from two chunky men who popped from darkened corners of the room to prod Norgil with revolver muzzles. One growled:

"This is a stickup! Stretch!"

As he obliged, Norgil tried to make out their faces. He couldn't, for they wore bandanna masks. One kept the magician covered while the other frisked him. Finding Norgil's keys, the fellow proceeded to unlock a large wardrobe trunk that stood in the corner.

Norgil's thoughts leaped ahead. His eyes, shifting occasionally, kept tally on the search. He was waiting until the crook reached the third drawer in the trunk. When his gaze changed, Norgil noted the dressing room door. It was ajar;

a mere rap would swing it inward. Norgil was hoping that the drawer would be opened first, the door soon afterward.

Events came as he calculated. The moment that the searching crook pulled the third drawer, Norgil whipped away from the thug who covered him. Before the trigger man could shoot, the magician was locked with the searcher by the trunk. Out of that grapple came a hand that gripped a gun.

The fist was Norgil's; the gun, his stage revolver that he had deftly snatched from its proper corner in the drawer!

As Norgil aimed for the gunner, he heard the expected rap. The door was swinging. Against the light beyond it, Norgil saw a startled face, its mouth wide open, eyes goggly as they stared through large-lensed glasses. But the arrival, despite his paleness, proved game.

"Get him, Judreck!" yelled Norgil. "The fellow with the gun!"

The secretary dived as the gunner wheeled. Norgil didn't give the crook a chance to fire. The magician's revolver was talking; its roar spurred the gunman to fight.

He didn't guess that the shots were blanks as he wildly yanked himself away from Judreck's tackle and stumbled out through the door. Nor did the crook that Norgil gripped. He thought that the magician had dropped his pal. With a wild, frantic howl, he too broke away and made for the door.

Judreck tried to trip the second crook but missed and lost his balance. Sprawling headlong, he went beneath Norgil's flying feet, tripping the magician as he started to give chase.

By the time Norgil was up again, both crooks were clattering toward the stage door, beyond reach of the blows that he had intended to give them with his gun.

Norgil kept up the pursuit, spicing it with a few blank shots that might have caused one crook or the other to give up hope of flight. It happened that their avenue of escape was too close. Instead of running out by the alley,

they cut through a space between two buildings.

Halting in the dusk, Norgil heard the roar of a motor starting from a parking lot. Turning about, he came back to the stage door to find Judreck blinking through his dislodged spectacles. Before Norgil could congratulate the secretary upon his prompt assistance, lights came on backstage.

For a moment, Norgil tightened his grip upon his gun, then thrust the weapon in his pocket. More men had arrived, attracted by the shots, but Norgil received them as friends, not enemies. They had come through from the box office, headed by Morton Rowden.

Chapter II CRIME'S PURPOSE

BY THE time Norgil had returned to his dressing room, newspaper reporters were on hand. There was one question that they wanted answered.

What had the crooks expected to find in Norgil's trunk that would make it worthwhile for them to stage so bold a raid?

Norgil could have answered that question, but he preferred to dodge it. Seated at his dressing table, he began to open the mail that Judreck had brought from the theater office. At intervals he smiled at the reporters and told them to wait awhile.

Getting no satisfaction from Norgil, the newshawks pestered Judreck. The secretary kept shaking his head in perplexed fashion, then suddenly had a bright idea. Turning to Norgil, he exclaimed:

"Perhaps they had heard about the Maximilian Medal!"

Right then, Norgil would gladly have doubled Judreck's salary. It *wasn't* the Maximilian Medal that the crooks had come after. But the medal was the very sort of thing that would impress the reporters.

Reaching to the unlocked trunk, Norgil fished in the vest pocket of his dress suit and brought out a gold medalion the size of a silver dollar. Deftly, he flipped it along the knuckles of his right hand, letting each finger somersault it farther. Bringing the medal back with his thumb, Norgil repeated the dextrous roll and handed the object to the reporters.

"A unique curio," Norgil told them suavely, "and therefore very valuable. That medal was struck off in honor of the Emperor Maximilian at the very hour of his execution.

"With me, it has proven a good-luck piece. I always carry it in my pocket when I give a show. Probably Judreck is right. Those crooks heard about this valuable talisman and came to steal it."

The reporters wanted to know more about the medal, so Judreck obligingly supplied them with press clippings that gave the whole story. But when the reporters had gone, Norgil withheld the congratulations that he intended to confer upon Judreck.

A blunt-nosed, long-jawed man had entered the dressing room and was talking to Morton Rowden. The fellow was wearing a derby hat, and one hand, hunched to his hip, drew his coat back far enough to display a badge. The newcomer looked like a headquarters dick, and the expression on his flattish face told that he hadn't been impressed by the history of the Maximilian Medal.

"This is Detective Delaney," introduced Rowden, his tone somewhat worried. "Tim Delaney, the best man on the force. I've been telling him about what happened here—"

"And it's pretty thin baloney," interjected Delaney.

Norgil eyed the detective coolly, then passed him the gold medallion.

"Look it over," said Norgil. "My story still stands."

Delaney glared sourly. He studied the medal, then tossed it on the dressing table.

"Bring it along," he told Norgil, "and your gun, too. We'll show them both to Chief Cartwright. We've got a law in this town regarding firearms, and you'll need a license for that revolver you use in your show."

Delaney stalked from the dressing room. Rowden went along, trying to soothe him. Judreck began to stammer apologies, but Norgil stopped him with a smile.

"Go on out," he told the secretary. "Don't let that chap worry you. We'll settle everything with the police chief."

Norgil went through the rest of his mail. Among the envelopes he found one that interested him. He opened it and read the note that it contained. Crumpling the paper, he thrust it in his pocket and looked up to find that he wasn't alone.

Miriam Laymond was watching him.

Of all the members of Norgil's troupe, Miriam was the one most in the magician's confidence. She had arrived, unnoticed by Norgil, in time to hear Delaney's comments. As Norgil glanced in her direction, he knew that this was one of those rare occasions upon which Miriam was really worried.

Norgil smiled, but Miriam didn't respond. There was a tremble of her lips that added to her natural beauty. Her eyes were large, so serious that they seemed unusually lovely. The brunette stepped closer and placed her hand upon Norgil's arm.

"Tell me"—the girl's whisper was a plea—"why did they really come here—those crooks?"

"You heard what I told Delaney."

"But I don't believe it." Miriam was emphatic. "You

haven't used that medal story in months. I was even surprised when Judreck knew about it. He hasn't been with the show long."

Norgil gave a nod.

"It was something else," he admitted. "I'll tell you the whole story later. Meanwhile, I want you to call my lawyer."

"Your lawyer?"

"Yes. I have one here in Westbury. His name is Hervey Grimm. You will find his number listed in the phone book."

"And you want him to come to police headquarters?"

The breathless manner of Miriam's query was proof of the girl's real worryment. Norgil's response was one of positive reassurance.

"Not at all," said the magician. "I want him to stay away. Just tell Grimm that everything is all right, that I will meet him after the show tonight."

Miriam nodded. There was something else that she wanted to say, but she managed to restrain it. Noting her expression, Norgil guessed the unspoken question and answered it.

"I'll meet you in an hour," he told the girl. "We'll have dinner at the hotel. Then you will hear the inside story."

With that, Norgil was gone.

Chapter III

PAST AND FUTURE

THE VISIT to police headquarters proved a triumph for Norgil. With Rowden arguing his cause, and Judreck backing up the testimony, the magician had no trouble convincing Chief Cartwright of the attack by the thugs.

Fingering the Maximilian Medal, the police chief decided

that such a rare curio would be valuable enough to attract thieves. He rebuked Detective Delaney.

Though the firearms law was strict in Westbury, the police chief decided that Norgil had been justified in using his gun, particularly since it had been loaded with blank cartridges. To assure the magician no further trouble, Chief Cartwright registered the revolver and gave Norgil a permit to carry it.

Riding back to the theater in Rowden's car, Norgil and the portly promoter chuckled over the setback that Detective Delaney had received. Even Judreck, usually serious, smiled.

In his dressing room, Norgil put the medal and the revolver in pockets of his evening clothes. Members of the company had arrived backstage, so there was little chance that the crooks would make another foray. Nevertheless, Norgil warned Judreck to lock both the trunk and dressing room, should the secretary go to the front office.

Leaving Judreck busy at a typewriter, Norgil strolled to the hotel to keep his dinner engagement with Miriam. At the hotel entrance, he found Tim Delaney waiting for him. The blunt-faced detective gruffed some apologies, then explained why he had come to find the magician.

"The chief told me to make a round of the joints," said the dick, "to see if I could spot those mobbies who barged in on you. How about coming along to identify them?"

Norgil reminded Delaney that the pair had worn masks; that, therefore, he couldn't help.

Delaney didn't agree. His wise grin denoted a return of his suspicions. Norgil settled that matter very convincingly.

"Go over to the theater," he told Delaney, "and pick up Judreck. He was in on the battle, too, so he will do as well as I would."

With Delaney gone, Norgil entered the hotel to find Miriam waiting in the lobby. As they walked to the dining room, Norgil asked her if she had called the lawyer, Grimm.

Miriam nodded, then said:

"He wasn't there when I phoned, so I went to his office. When Grimm came in, I gave him your message."

Something in Miriam's tone told Norgil that Miriam had not liked Hervey Grimm. He questioned her on that subject when they were seated at a table by a corner window.

"Perhaps Grimm is all right," conceded Miriam, "but still I don't like him. He reminded me of a fox."

"That's what I need here in Westbury," said Norgil, "a fox. Grimm fills the bill. Look."

He pointed from the window and indicated something. It was a gold-lettered sign above a gray stone building, and it read:

LORING, CRAYDE & CO.
INVESTMENT BANKERS

There was a reflective look in Norgil's gaze, an expression so fraught with memory that Miriam watched his eyes. She scarcely saw his lips move as he spoke.

"The founder of that company," said Norgil softly, "was Foster Loring. He remained its president until it failed, a good many years ago. The company was reorganized by his partner, Amos Crayde.

"By that time Foster Loring was dead. He had never recovered from the shock of that failure, for he had considered the company solvent at the time it crashed. And Foster Loring"—Norgil's eyes met Miriam's—"was my father."

Miriam was too amazed to speak. She saw Norgil gaze from the window; her own eyes went back to the sign. Those letters in the name Loring seemed to dance. Miriam could picture them rearranging themselves to spell Norgil. For the first time she understood why the magician had chosen the stage name with which he had become famous.

Norgil was speaking again; his tone, though low, was no longer soft. His words were sharp.

"I was absent from Westbury," he said, "and I never returned until today. For years I have been gathering facts from many sources to prove my father innocent in the failure that overtook his firm.

"The documents that I have gathered place the full blame upon Amos Crayde, the richest man in Westbury. Through my lawyer, Hervey Grimm, I have demanded that Crayde admit the truth and make restitution to all persons whose investments were lost."

An instant thought struck Miriam.

"Those thieves at the theater!" she exclaimed. "They came to steal the evidence!"

"Probably," agreed Norgil, with a tight smile. "But Grimm has the documents. If Crayde made that thrust this afternoon, it was his last. He wants to talk to me."

Miriam remembered the note that Norgil had placed in his pocket before he left the dressing room. She saw Norgil rise from the table, his thoughts of dinner banished.

"I know you won't mind eating alone," said the magician. "I'm going to stay in my room here at the hotel in case Crayde shows up. Grimm said it wouldn't hurt if I talked to the old swindler alone."

"Don't go easy with him," pleaded Miriam. "Remember—"

"I'll remember one thing," interposed Norgil. "If there is any man who deserves any punishment that I can possibly give, that man is Amos Crayde."

A waiter was approaching. Norgil glanced at his watch and casually reminded Miriam that there was only an hour and a half until showtime. Then he was gone, and the girl, her dinner order taken, was staring from the window toward the gold-lettered sign that symbolized a strange, long-buried story.

Chapter IV

MURDER DISCOVERED

BY SHOWTIME, Miriam had learned much regarding Amos Crayde, thanks to the curiosity that prompted her and her ability at asking artful questions.

Crayde, it appeared, lived alone in a large mansion near the town's limits. He had servants, of course, but they were so overworked and underpaid that they had recently gone on strike. Crayde's only compromise had been to rehire them on a part-time basis.

Perhaps those servants weren't around tonight. If such were the case, thought Miriam, no one would know if Crayde stole out and came to visit Norgil.

The thought alarmed Miriam, particularly because Norgil hadn't reached the theater when the fifteen-minute call came. Miriam saw Judreck arrive, accompanied by Detective Delaney, who remained backstage while Judreck went to the front office to get some theater passes. Returning, the secretary went to Norgil's dressing room, then poked his head out to ask where the magician was.

"He hasn't come from the hotel yet," Miriam told him, while she tried to suppress the anxiety in her voice. "Perhaps you had better call him, Mr. Judreck."

Judreck began to nod, then exclaimed:

"Ah! There he is!"

Norgil had entered the stage door. Hurrying to the dressing room, he began to get ready for the show. Judreck, finding that he wasn't needed, announced that he was taking Delaney to a box to watch the show. The remark brought a smile through the makeup that Norgil was smearing on his face.

"Good enough," said the magician. "Delaney thought I was fooling him this afternoon. He'll be really fooled when he gets a look at the show tonight."

Norgil reached the wing at curtain call. Miriam had just time to whisper:

“Did you see Crayde?”

“No,” undertoned Norgil. “The old buzzard didn’t show up. But I’m going out to his house after the show, and so is Grimm. We’ll settle this thing tonight.”

All during the show Miriam was uneasy. Time and again she nearly missed her cues. She was wondering why Crayde hadn’t come to the hotel. It seemed like part of a plan, even though the rest puzzled her.

Crayde, from the way Miriam pictured the man, would be the sort who would pull some evil ruse. Perhaps Norgil was up against a master schemer who was ready to reverse the situation at the eleventh hour.

Tonight was a time when Norgil might need some real assistance, other than the sort that Miriam gave him on the stage. That repeated thought gave the girl an idea, which she finally planned to put in practice at the earliest moment.

As soon as the show ended, Miriam scudded to her dressing room. Still attired in the scanty, short-skirted costume that she wore in the finale, the girl flung a long coat over her shoulders and hurried out through the stage door. Norgil did not see her go.

There was a taxi at the next corner. Entering it, Miriam gave Crayde’s address.

Alighting at the mansion, Miriam made her way along a hedge-fringed walk. The house was dark except for a side window that opened on to a sun porch. Miriam decided that the porch would be an excellent vantage point from which to watch for Norgil’s arrival.

Soon the brunette was peering over the window ledge. The window itself was open, which made it all the better. The room that Miriam saw was a lighted study with a big desk in the corner. Behind the desk was a swivel chair, tilted

back at a steep angle as though it had a broken spring. Miriam wondered about that, until she saw a sight that really startled her.

Poked from beside the desk was a scrawny hand, its fingers bent like withered claws!

Miriam gasped. Then, bravely, she swung across the windowsill into the room itself. On tiptoe, she approached the desk and peered beyond it. She saw more than the hand; she saw the body, half slid from the swivel chair.

She saw a face, dry like parchment, with drawn lips beneath its thin, hooked nose. There were eyes, glassy in death; a stiff shirt front, stained with blood. The dead man could be one person only: Amos Crayde. The wound was obviously the result of a revolver bullet, and from the dryish glisten of the blood, Miriam knew that Crayde must have died an hour or more before her arrival.

There was a sheet of paper on the desk under the telephone. Tightening, Miriam read its carbon-printed lines. It was a duplicate of a letter that Crayde had sent to Norgil, but it said nothing of a meeting at the hotel. Instead, it stated that Crayde would expect Norgil here after the show.

Then Miriam's eyes were riveted by something that lay on the floor almost beneath Crayde's body. She didn't have to stoop to touch the object; she could make it out plainly by the light from the desk lamp. It was something that she had seen often before—a rounded object of gold.

The Maximilian Medal!

Mechanically, Miriam found herself picking up the telephone. She called the hotel and asked for Norgil's room, hoping that he had stopped off there.

Norgil's voice came briskly across the wire; it gave Miriam a sudden thrill of reassurance.

Finding her own voice, the girl began to detail her discovery. She had just finished with the news when a chance

sound caused her to clamp the receiver on the hook and make a quick dash for the window. Her move came too late.

The sound had been the opening of the door. Miriam was spied by an entering man, who also saw Crayde's body from his vantage angle. The man gave a sharp cry that made Miriam turn. She saw a face that she recognized—the pointed nose and foxlike features of Norgil's lawyer, Hervey Grimm!

The attorney wasn't alone. Behind him were two men who looked like servants. They bounded forward at Grimm's shout and grabbed Miriam as she tried to dive out through the window. Squirming from her coat, Miriam managed an instant's freedom.

Then hands were ripping at her scanty stage attire, clutching silk that tore, until Grimm, plunging into the fray, seized Miriam bodily and clamped a hand across her mouth to silence her screams.

Half smothered, Miriam sagged limply into the arms of her captors.

Chapter V

NORGIL'S RIDE

SLOWLY PACING his hotel room, Norgil was pondering upon the facts that Miriam had given him. His smile was bitter as he recalled Delaney's talk of a framed stickup earlier in the day. Here was a frameup that worked exactly opposite.

During the hour that Norgil had stayed in his hotel room expecting Crayde, someone had taken the stage revolver and gold medallion from the dressing room. At Crayde's, a murderer had slain the old man with the gun and had left the medal on the scene.

The gun must have been replaced in the dressing room later, for Norgil had used it in the show. As for the medal, he had supposed it to be deep in his vest pocket, where he always kept it but seldom bothered to look for it.

As for the letter that Miriam had mentioned, it added to the plot. Norgil hadn't received such a letter from Crayde. Probably the letter had been purloined; and in all probability, it had later been added to Norgil's files in his dressing room.

The whole game was to make Norgil appear to be Crayde's murderer. Should Grimm produce the evidence that revealed Crayde's past, it would serve to show that Norgil had every reason to want Crayde's death.

It was fortunate that Norgil hadn't learned the reason why Miriam had suddenly cut off the phone call. Otherwise his alarm regarding the girl would have prevented him from thinking clearly. As it was, Norgil was piecing together the details of the planted crime, and they all added up to a definite total. That total was Judreck.

Assuming that the stickup at the theater had been faked—not by Norgil, but by Judreck—it would have given the secretary the chance to mention the Maximilian Medal, which Judreck had artfully done. Trusted by Norgil, Judreck could easily have taken the medal, the gun, and the letter, then replaced the last two.

As for the brief note that Norgil had received from Crayde, mentioning a meeting at the hotel, Judreck could easily have faked it, for the note was unsigned.

But Judreck could not be the murderer!

He was a tool who had planned a simple alibi. Ironically enough, Norgil had helped Judreck's cause by giving him a better one. By Norgil's own order, Judreck had gone along with Detective Delaney and had later seen the show with him.

Except for the short intervals wherein Judreck had maneuvered his dirty work, the treacherous secretary had not

been out of Delaney's sight. Certainly the detective could vouch for the fact that Judreck could not have made a trip to Crayde's house and committed the murder.

Norgil picked up the telephone. He put in a call to Grimm's residence, only to learn that the lawyer wasn't there. He was on the point of calling Morton Rowden when he remembered that the promoter had gone out with members of the Home Week Committee. Out of a sudden whirl of thoughts, Norgil suddenly realized that an entirely different person was the one that he really ought to see.

Norgil was thinking of Tim Delaney. The star detective was the man to hear Norgil's story, before he listened to any other version involving Crayde's death.

Heading for the hotel lobby, Norgil was wondering where he would find Delaney. He didn't have to wonder long.

Just as he stepped through the revolving door, a hand clamped his wrist. Norgil met sharp eyes peering from Delaney's blunt face and saw the dick's hand deep in a coat pocket.

"You're coming quietly," growled Delaney. "I'll make it easier for you, since you saved me the trouble of coming up after you."

"For what?" inquired Norgil coolly.

"For murder!" returned Delaney. "They found Crayde's body and the evidence. When they phoned the theater, I sent Judreck out there. We happened to be backstage when the call came."

There was a taxi parked at the curb, but its driver was absent. Delaney shoved Norgil into the cab. Pulling out his stubby revolver, the detective kept the magician covered from the door. One foot on the step, Delaney gave a shrill whistle to bring the taxi driver from a lunchroom.

"Listen, Delaney," began Norgil, "let's talk this over. If you'll listen to what I've got to say—"

"I've listened to too much of your hokum," interrupted the dick. "From now on I do the talking, until I get you to headquarters."

The driver arrived. Delaney didn't have to flash his badge, for the fellow recognized him. Shoving himself into the cab, the detective ordered the cabman to drive to police headquarters. Norgil had subsided; the driver didn't notice that anyone was in the cab except Delaney.

A desperate idea came to Norgil—one that was so wild that it seemed almost hopeless, yet the promise that it carried was immense. Here, in the next few minutes, he would have his chance to counteract the scheme that had enmeshed him. Delaney wouldn't have to listen to Norgil's story—not just yet!

With a sudden shift, Norgil pounced for the detective. It was his hand, this time, that grabbed a waiting wrist. Under the sudden grip, Delaney's gun was forced away from Norgil's ribs, while the magician's other fist clipped hard for the detective's jaw.

The taxi driver heard the fierce scuffle that followed. Peering back, he saw bodies flaying in the cab. One man slumped.

It was Delaney, though the driver didn't see the detective's face. An instant later there was a muffled gunshot from close to the floor.

The driver jammed on the brakes. Norgil's face came through the window, his elbow across it, so the driver would not recognize him. In his free hand Norgil had Delaney's gun. He poked the muzzle against the man's neck.

"Get going, mug," growled the magician, "unless you want me to croak you like I did that cluck Delaney!"

The driver leaped from the cab. Norgil opened the door and spurred the man's flight with shots from the revolver. When the cabby had disappeared into an alleyway, Norgil

took the wheel and started the cab in motion.

Twisting through streets that he remembered from his boyhood days, the magician was off upon an elusive journey in the captured cab, with the prone and silent figure of Detective Delaney rolling upon the floor.

Chapter VI CRIME'S FINISH

A GROUP was gathered in Crayde's study, with Police Chief Cartwright in charge. Hervey Grimm had just finished telling how he had come in, accompanied by Crayde's servants, to find Miriam making a phone call to Norgil.

Apparently the girl knew a lot about the murder, but she still stuck to her testimony. Her story seemed honest, and she looked very pitiful wrapped in the coat that had been returned to her to cover what little remained of her scanty stage attire. But Chief Cartwright was not greatly impressed by her insistence that Norgil must be innocent.

Judreck, among the listeners, wore an expression that mingled surprise with innocence. Another man arrived just as the testimony was finished. The newcomer was Morton Rowden.

"It's up to Delaney," announced the police chief. "When he brings in Norgil—"

The door opened at that moment. On the threshold, suave as ever, stood Norgil. He smiled as Cartwright excitedly fumbled for a gun.

"I didn't murder Crayde," he announced. "The letter that he mailed to me was never delivered. It was probably planted in my files later. There's the man that I accuse."

He pointed to Judreck.

"I suppose I took the gun, too!" exclaimed Judreck hoarsely. "And the medal! You can't pin this on me, Norgil—"

That was all Judreck could manage to say. Norgil, fingers dipped in his vest pocket, was bringing out a gold object which he handed to the police chief. Even Miriam was amazed, for Norgil was displaying an exact duplicate of the Maximilian Medal, of which only one was supposed to exist!

"This is the genuine medal," said Norgil. "The one that I see there on the desk is obviously an imitation. Too bad, Judreck, that you didn't have time to steal the real one. I suppose that you intended to do that later."

For the first time the advantage was Norgil's. He made the most of it. Facing the confused Judreck, he deliberately accused the secretary of murdering Crayde.

Judreck's nerve began to weaken.

"I've got an alibi!" he screeched. "Get Delaney—ask him—he'll tell you that I was with him. I couldn't have come out here—"

"Why not call headquarters?" queried Norgil, facing the police chief, "and hear what Delaney has to say?"

Cartwright agreed that the idea was a good one. But before he could pick up the telephone, it began to ring. The call was for the police chief. When he had finished with it, he laid the telephone heavily upon the desk.

"Delaney has been murdered," he said solemnly. "Someone shot him in a taxi. The driver escaped, then reported it to headquarters."

Judreck was on his feet. But he wasn't staring at Norgil. His gaze went farther, toward a man who was shifting uneasily in the direction of the door. That man was Morton Rowden.

"You killed Delaney!" howled Judreck. "Murdered him, like you did Crayde. So you could kill my alibi along with him—"

Rowden's hand went to his hip, but he never drew the gun that he had there. Norgil was quicker in producing the revolver that he had captured from Tim Delaney.

His shot nipped Rowden's arm. The portly man groaned as he sagged to the floor.

Crayde's servants grabbed the murderer. Judreck, wildly anxious to vindicate himself, was pouring out his story in a fashion that could have stood no denial.

He had joined Norgil's show at Rowden's order, he confessed. For Rowden, it happened, was the one man in Westbury who had aided Crayde in crooked schemes, and had been anxious to spike Norgil's exposure of the swindler.

Norgil had needed a secretary, and Judreck had managed to get the job. From then on he had kept contact with Rowden. With the Old Home Week celebration due, Rowden had struck upon the happy idea of booking Norgil's show.

It had been when Norgil chased the dressing room stickup men from the theater that he had started to suspect Judreck. For it had been the secretary who had tripped the magician, a rather clumsy trick in order to aid the thugs' escape. And for a new man, Judreck had known entirely too much about the medal, for Norgil seldom told anyone about it. It was the secretary who had seen Norgil place the medal and the revolver in his dress suit pocket in his dressing room.

The crooks who had faked the stickup were tools of Rowden. With that for a starter, Judreck had handed the fake note to Norgil, its purpose to keep the magician at the hotel where he would have no alibi.

Judreck, stealing the stage revolver and the Maximilian Medal, had passed them to Rowden. It was the promoter who had murdered Crayde, leaving the medal on the scene. The gun had gone back to Judreck, in the front office, and the secretary had left it in the dressing room, also filing the actual letter from Crayde, which Judreck had easily intercepted.

Judreck, of course, had needed an alibi. He and Rowden had agreed upon that. Judreck's chance to go along with Delaney had seemed perfect. But it hadn't worked out as Judreck hoped.

"You thought I'd squeal!" Judreck was screeching the words at Rowden. "You figured you could frame me along with Norgil, and let the cops take their pick. That's why you croaked Delaney—"

A new sight stopped Judreck cold. A man was shouldering his way through the doorway, his wrists handcuffed behind him, his mouth gagged by a handkerchief. His derby hat was gone, but it was still possible to recognize Detective Tim Delaney.

Norgil approached the detective with a key that fitted the cuffs. While he was releasing the manacled dick, the magician purred an apology.

"Sorry, Delaney," he said, "but you wouldn't listen. That's why I rigged you the way you are and left you in the taxi. But I've trapped a murderer for you. Take him along."

Delaney took the wounded Rowden and Judreck with him, locked in the handcuffs that the detective himself had worn. Norgil and Miriam went back to the hotel with Grimm, where the lawyer made final arrangements to make public the facts of Crayde's crooked past.

"The estate will go through with the settlement," assured Grimm as he was leaving. "Amos Crayde has no heirs, and the claims are genuine. With a couple of other crooks also bagged, it looks as though you've cleared up everything, Norgil."

Miriam didn't quite agree with the last statement, and said so to Norgil while the magician was eating the dinner that he had missed. Miriam had remembered something that everyone else had forgotten in the rush.

"That second medal was a cute one," remarked Miriam. "It jolted Judreck when he saw it, because he thought that

he had taken the only one there was. But how did you get the other one?"

Norgil's hands went to his pockets. He brought out the two medals. One began to crawl along the knuckles of his left hand, while the other performed its gyrations upon the fingers of his right.

"There always were two," he said with a smile. "Did you ever hear of a magician having anything—even a white rabbit—without a duplicate?"

Murder in Wax

SIXTY-FIVE YEARS ago I watched Mysterious Dunninger present a levitation act on the stage of New York's famous Eden Musee. He was using an improved form of the Trilby Illusion introduced by Herrmann the Great a few decades before, and it was well suited to the small stage of the intimate theater, for gasps were frequent from the spellbound audience that watched a hypnotized girl rise slowly from a couch and remain suspended without visible support.

Later I saw Thurston present the famous Kellar Levitation on many larger stages, and I toured two seasons with Blackstone, who nightly performed an advanced version that he had inherited from Kellar. Between times I saw other types, like the Aga, which was often performed on sideshow platforms, and the Asrah, where the sleeping beauty was covered with a cloth that was suddenly snatched away, vanishing the girl in midair.

So through the years I talked with many Floating Ladies and found that they took their work nonchalantly. At the end of a tour they regarded reposing in midair about the equivalent of riding in the upper berth of a Pullman sleeping car, except that the levitation was much easier getting up and down. Nevertheless, they all agreed that the hushed awe of the audience made them apprehensive that some night the unexpected might happen.

Just what, they didn't know, so I had to decide what, as an appropriate opening for a Norgil story. So naturally I set the scene as closely as possible to that first eventful night when I gazed in awe at the first Floating Lady that I had ever seen and wondered what would happen next.

Murder in Wax

Chapter I DROPS OF BLOOD

PAUSING IN HIS regular evening stroll along Fifth Avenue, Norgil admired the jade pendants in Clafley's window. They were exquisite, those pendants, of the apple-green hue that marked them of the best variety. They were also tagged with a price that brought them within reason.

Miriam Laymond liked jade. Next Wednesday would be her birthday, and there was no gift that she could appreciate more than those pendants. Out of ten thousand dollars' worth of jewelry in the bulletproof window, and probably twenty times that amount in the vaults of Clafley & Co., Jewelers, Miriam, given free choice, would still prefer jade.

Unfortunately, it all depended upon how this week turned out. Maybe Norgil's salary check wouldn't be forthcoming. There was an easy way to settle that question—take it up with Harmon Wier. There was still time to discuss the matter before the nine o'clock show, for a five-hundred-dollar clock in the jeweler's window gave the time as half past eight.

With a whimsical smile upon his mustached lips, Norgil turned the corner just past Clafley's and stopped at the first building on the side street, where a neon sign shone above the arched entrance:

NEW EDEN MUSEE

Norgil couldn't shake off the thrill that gripped him as he went up the steps and through the entrance of the waxwork museum. He had never forgotten his boyhood recollections of the original Eden Musee on Twenty-third Street, where many famous magicians—de Kolta, Powell and Dunninger, among them—had played prolonged engagements.

That link with the past was the reason why Norgil had accepted Wier's offer to appear at the New Musee. Norgil couldn't resist the proposition when Wier told him that the place would have all the tradition of the famous old museum—and the proprietor had made good his boast.

Passing the turnstile, Norgil chuckled at the sight of an attendant dozing in a chair. That chap, like another who stood lifting his hand and pointing, were both mechanical figures made of wax. So, too, was the rural gentleman who was gawking at a sign which said "*Beware of Pickpockets*"—while a dummy dip was lifting a fat wallet from his hip pocket.

On Norgil's right as he walked through the main hall was another large room filled with waxworks, while on his left was the little theater where the magician gave his show. Straight ahead was a grand staircase; below it were stone steps leading down into the fearful Chamber of Horrors, which filled the entire basement.

Ascending the grand stairs, Norgil came to the curtained entrance to the Hall of History. To his right was the room where the automatic chess player was housed along with

other mechanical marvels, while to his left was a passage leading to a door marked "*Office.*" Norgil rapped at the office door.

A cheery voice invited him to come in.

Harmon Wier, gray-haired and long-faced, gave a smile when he saw Norgil. When Wier smiled, it meant that he was satisfied, for his face was normally quite solemn. Tonight, Wier was stroking a very frisky Maltese kitten that gamboled about the flat-topped desk, attracted by two playthings—a pencil and a fancy string that girded a big bundle of programs.

Norgil sat down in a chair opposite. Declining a cigar that he wouldn't have time to smoke, he asked:

"How's business?"

"Improving steadily," replied Wier. "As well as we could expect, considering that the season hasn't really begun and we haven't finished installing the exhibits. That can't be done until the decorators have finished."

Norgil nodded. It was still summer, and he knew that workmen were busy every night completing the Musee. Despite delayed construction, Wier had insisted upon opening the place on schedule.

"Your ten weeks' booking still stands," added Wier, "if that is what is troubling you, Norgil. If necessary, I can run for an entire season at a loss. If you run short on rabbits"—he chuckled and tossed the kitten to Norgil—"use this!"

Wier's cheerful mood was contagious. Norgil's smile increased as he politely replaced the kitten on the desk and strolled from the office. He was ready to work for a chap like Wier. When the manager saw the show tonight, he would like it better than ever.

Sixty minutes later Norgil, attired in a dress suit, was in the middle of his show, receiving the plaudits of a small but enthusiastic audience. Fishbowls were appearing from silk foulards, and girls were vanishing from flimsy cabinets,

to the weak melody of a four-piece orchestra.

It was a good show, up to Norgil's best standard, even though he had clipped the size of his company because of the small stage. It was worth the five hundred dollars a week that Wier was paying. And business had shown a slight improvement. Not enough to suit Norgil, for there were only a few hundred people in the audience, but that was better than the same night a week ago.

Wier probably knew the New York audiences, so that left the problem up to him. Noting Wier at the back of the little theater, Norgil observed that the gray-haired proprietor of the New Musee looked quite as satisfied as before.

Norgil was glad that Wier had arrived in time to see the closing act—the levitation scene. Miriam stepped forward, charming in her Hindu costume, and Norgil, starting a series of pretended hypnotic passes, found himself looking at eyes that he had long ago conceded were the loveliest that he had ever seen.

How serious Miriam's eyes were! They always had that sober look at this stage of the show. But Norgil, solemnly straightening his lips to the line of his mustache, could picture those same eyes sparkling, fairly dancing, on next Wednesday night.

Stiffening, Miriam fell straight back into the waiting hands of Fritz, who, with another turbaned assistant, helped place the brunette on a couch, while Norgil was reminding himself that he must not forget to buy the jade pendant as soon as Clafley's jewelry store opened in the morning.

As the orchestra provided the soft strains of "Lieberstraum," Miriam's prone figure rose from the couch. Gracefully poised in midair, she seemed lifted by some invisible force that carried her to a height of six feet, when, at a motion of Norgil's hands, she remained suspended, motionless.

Fritz brought a ladder and a large hoop. Ascending the

small steps, Norgil passed the hoop about Miriam's body from head to foot. Then slowly, dramatically, he was about to descend the small ladder when he happened to glance again at Miriam's eyes.

The girl's gaze was focused upon the ceiling above the stage. There was fascinated horror in her eyes, something that Norgil had never witnessed among all their varying moods.

Before he could divert his gaze from Miriam's face, something splashed upon the girl's right hand, raised somewhat above her breast. She winced. A shiver seized her body.

Norgil saw the blob arrive. He looked, identified it against Miriam's hand—a drop of blood!

Again a crimson droplet struck. By the time that Norgil was down the ladder, a third globule of blood had fallen. His eyes raised upward, Norgil sighted the source—a reddish patch that was oozing through the ceiling.

His hands on the move, Norgil was ordering Miriam toward the couch. In response, she was floating downward at the same graceful speed with which she had risen. But that pace, to both Norgil and the girl, had become a painful slow motion.

For Miriam's descent from that berth in midair was accompanied by the steady *drip-drip* of the raining blood, that seemingly could betoken nothing less than the passing of a human life!

Chapter II

WANTED—A CORPSE

“STEADY—”

Norgil undertoned the single word, and his whisper, though vaguely distant, was soothing to Miriam's ears. She steadied.

In fact the girl's quiver had ended after that first drop of blood had struck. Miriam had nerve, and plenty of it, enough to steel her through many an ordeal. But it had taken all her effort to restrain herself until she heard Norgil's tone.

With that, Miriam let her eyes go half shut and waited patiently to reach the couch. Somehow Norgil's voice carried a magic charm, for the girl could no longer feel the frightening warmth of those pelting drops.

Norgil knew why. The drip of blood had ended before Miriam settled on the couch. When she reached there, Norgil gave a signal for Fritz to close in the curtains. The moment that was done, he whipped out a handkerchief and wiped the blood from Miriam's hand as he brought her, half dazed, to her feet.

The levitation act was not the usual finale, but the audience took it that the show was over, judging from the wave of applause that came from beyond the closed curtains. Miriam was on her feet, nodding, forcing a smile as Norgil asked:

"Ready for a bow?"

Fritz parted the curtains. The magician took a bow, holding the hand and arm of his lovely assistant.

Miriam was as pale as one of the Musee's waxwork figures, but the spectators were not surprised. Some supposed that the girl's pallor was due to the hypnotic influence that had caused her to float in midair; still, Norgil could hear a slight murmur as the curtains again closed.

"Some of them saw those drops," he said grimly. Then: "How are you, Miriam? All right?"

"Of course." The girl shuddered, then showed a genuine smile. "If the show's over, I think I'd better get dressed."

"A good idea."

As Miriam left for her dressing room, Norgil pointed out the bloodstained ceiling to Fritz and told his assistant to hurry out and summon Wier.

"After you've started Wier back here," added Norgil, "stick around in the main hall and see who goes out."

It wasn't long before Wier arrived. He was in his solemn mood, anxious of gaze as he asked:

"What's happened, Norgil? Why have you cut the show short?"

Norgil pointed to the ceiling and showed Wier the blood-stained handkerchief. Wier stood horrified as he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief of his own. Then, in sudden alarm, he exclaimed:

"My office is directly over here. That . . . blood, or whatever it is, must have come from there!"

"I know it," returned Norgil. "We'd better go up and have a look."

As they hurried up the grand staircase, Wier explained breathlessly that he had left the office unlocked. There had been nothing of value in the room; he couldn't understand why anyone would have gone there. Hand on the doorknob, Wier couldn't find enough strength to turn it. Norgil pushed him aside and yanked the door wide.

The Maltese kitten turned its head from the flat-topped desk and gave a welcoming purr. Norgil took quick strides across the floor, stopping short beyond the desk. Wier joined him there. Both stared at the thing they saw.

A bottle of red ink lay on the floor. Its cork gone, the red fluid had formed a pool. Much of the ink had flowed into a crack in the floor. Wier gave a grateful gasp.

"The kitten!" he exclaimed. Then, managing to regain his smile: "I should have known what it was. The only ink I've been using is red, because so far we've been losing money. What's more, the cat was starting after that bottle last night. I should have remembered it."

Norgil joined in a chuckle. He and Wier were soon laughing heartily at their mutual mistake. Going down to the theater,

now emptied of its audience, Norgil crossed the stage. As an aftermath to his comedy, a blob of red ink descended from the ceiling and struck his face. Norgil was wiping it away as he met Miriam, who had hastily dressed.

"Nothing but red ink," explained Norgil, "so don't be alarmed."

He told her the details of the discovery, and Miriam gave a relieved laugh of her own. Norgil suggested that she go out and bring Fritz, as there was no use to watch for the exit of an imaginary murderer. As the girl was leaving, Norgil added:

"By the way, get me one of the programs. I meant to pick one up when I came in. Only be sure you talk to one of the real attendants, not a dummy—like you did the day when we arrived here."

When Miriam returned she had a program, but she had to apologize because it was rumpled.

"They're all out," she explained. "This program is one that somebody left in a theater chair."

Norgil nodded. He began to finger through the program. Suddenly he turned to Fritz.

"We might as well check up," said Norgil. "You didn't see anyone suspicious go out, did you?"

Fritz shook his head.

"Where were the customers going," questioned Norgil suddenly, "after they left the theater?"

"About everywhere," replied Fritz. "Some went across to the big exhibit room; a lot of them went up to the Hall of History. Then there were a dozen or more who went down to the Chamber of Horrors."

"Did any go up to look at the automatic chess player?"

"Yes—several."

Norgil dismissed Fritz with a nod. The assistant went to get dressed, but Miriam remained as Norgil sat down upon the levitation couch. Miriam had noticed what Fritz had not.

Norgil's forehead was wrinkled; a new seriousness had come to his face. He saw the girl, but she did not disturb his thoughts. Instead, Norgil began to voice his ideas aloud.

As Miriam watched, he brought the red-stained handkerchief into the light. Unfolding it, the magician studied the trophy, and said slowly:

"It still looks like blood."

Silently, Miriam agreed. The drops had been warm, like blood. The handkerchief bore a deeper dye than any that ink could have caused.

"Which means that there should be a corpse," resumed Norgil seriously. "The body isn't in Wier's office. It could not have gone out through the exit. It couldn't be in any of the exhibit rooms"—he was spreading the program with the floor plan of the New Musee—"except—"

Norgil shook his head.

"How it could get there is also a mystery," he added, "but we're going to have a look"—he paused, watching Miriam's face—"in the Chamber of Horrors!"

Chapter III THE CHAMBER OF HORRORS

MIRIAM ACCEPTED Norgil's decision quite calmly. In fact, her eyes showed eagerness at the magician's suggestion of some solution to the mystery. Then came her puzzled question:

"But how could a body have gotten there? Wier's office is above here, isn't it? And the Chamber of Horrors is in the basement—"

"I know all that," interposed Norgil. "But we're going to

check up just the same. Let's do this neatly, Miriam, without anybody knowing where we've gone."

The task was not overdifficult for people who could distinguish real museum attendants from the dummy ones. There were still enough customers in the place to keep most of the attendants busy. Watching from the theater doorway, Norgil and Miriam spied their opportunity and reached the stairs to the Chamber.

Hollow whispers greeted them as they descended the stone steps. The tones came from a few of the patrons who were still going the rounds, for voices carried far in the vaulted passages below. There was a regular route through the Chamber of Horrors which everyone followed. Hence, by keeping to the rear, the new visitors would not be noticed.

But as they started along the blue-lighted corridor, Miriam suddenly gripped Norgil's arm. Despite the fact that this was her first visit to the Chamber, the girl wasn't frightened. She merely thought that they were discovered.

"Look . . . here comes an attendant—"

Norgil smiled at Miriam's exclamation. He told the brunette to watch. The "attendant" approached at a jerky pace and went past them, stare-eyed. As his foot struck the end wall past the curved steps, there was a *click*. The attendant wheeled around to retrace his steps.

"A robot!" exclaimed Miriam. "I should have known it from the way he moves along, then stops."

"Electrically controlled," explained Norgil, pointing to metal strips that the figure followed, "but not enough juice to give anyone a shock. Wier paid fifteen hundred dollars for that figure, and got a bargain. Also"—he smiled in recollection—"he picked up a novelty that the original Musee didn't have."

Paced by the robot, they started through the Chamber of Horrors. At every exhibit, Norgil paused and studied the

program by the bluish light. Miriam gazed in fascination at the fearful things on display.

She saw a life-sized elephant in wax, stamping a Hindu criminal's head. There were torture scenes in medieval dungeons, and a portrayal, in all-too-realistic wax, of a sultan decapitating a slave with a scimitar.

During their pauses, the robot completed his trip to the other end of the horseshoe-shaped corridors and passed them on his return.

"Only three exhibits more," announced Norgil, "then we come to the exit—a maze with turnstiles that confuses people when they go out to reach the other stairs."

"What are the exhibits?" asked Miriam.

"First, the Chicago massacre," Norgil read from the program, "the one that took place on St. Valentine's Day. Then, Marie Antoinette on the guillotine. Finally, Bluebeard's secret room—"

He stopped as the robot arrived, overtaking them. Lifting the figure from its tracks, Norgil leaned it against the wall. He wanted to study the St. Valentine's Day massacre, where wax figures of gangsters lay riddled by machine-gun fire.

Checking the names from the program, Norgil stepped closer and beckoned to Miriam. As she looked at the dozen or so figures slumped at grotesque angles, Norgil suggested:

"There is one too many. Tell me which one it is."

Miriam studied the exhibit, then pointed.

"Why," she gasped, in an astonished whisper, "one of the group is stabbed . . . not shot! Look . . . the knife handle is in sight, in his back—"

The full tragedy of the discovery made Miriam pause. It dawned on her why Norgil had suggested the Chamber of Horrors. Despite its location, the Chamber was the one place where a dead man could be openly stowed by someone in a huge hurry.

Norgil was stooped beside the figure that showed the knife handle. From the way the magician handled it, the body was not wax. The dummies, as Miriam knew, were very light; but Norgil could scarcely shift the form of the stabbed man.

As Miriam watched, she saw the glint of the knife blade, then a fresh ooze of blood, quite different from the painted, frozen crimson that adorned the other figures. That body, the corpse of a real man, was the one that had dripped blood from the floor of Wier's office down through the roof of the stage to spell its message on Miriam's hand!

As Miriam gripped the hand in question, feeling an imaginary return of the damp warmth, Norgil went through the dead man's pockets. His results seemed nil until he came to one vest pocket. There, his fingers produced a small, folded slip of paper.

Miriam chanced to turn away as Norgil looked about. Thinking that the girl had not observed the find, the magician deftly spread the slip, noting it as he put it in his own vest pocket. Rising, he faced Miriam with almost a questioning gaze.

About to ask if he had found anything, Miriam caught the question before it reached her lips. She knew that Norgil would have told her, had she inquired, but she preferred to wait and learn the reason for the secrecy.

"It's our man, all right," decided Norgil. "Who he is—who killed him—how he got here—we'll have to learn all that later. Right now we're going upstairs, not through that trick maze, but by the way we came in."

Calmly, he put the robot back on its track, sending it toward the inner wall. Soberly, Norgil and Miriam went out through the long, deserted passages, where the bordering exhibits of wax no longer seemed things of horror. They found another chance to ease out from the stairway and went back to the theater. There, Norgil politely suggested that

Miriam go to her hotel—that he would telephone her later.

“In a little while,” smiled the girl. “I have a few things to pack and take along with me.”

Norgil went to his dressing room. Soon Miriam, peering from her own door, saw him cross the stage. Hurrying into the magician’s room, the girl found the vest of his dress suit. In the pocket she discovered the folded slip of paper.

Typewritten, it bore the brief and cryptic statement:

H.H. 11:30 P.M.

Chapter IV **THE DOUBLE SURPRISE**

WHEN NORGIL came back to get the precious slip that he had forgotten, Miriam was gone. The magician talked to some attendants, telling them that he was shipping in some crates with new magical apparatus and that the truck would arrive in about an hour. Harmon Wier had given Norgil a written order to the attendants telling them to wait and unload the shipment.

Norgil left. More than half of the hour was gone when Miriam stole suddenly from the darkened theater and ran squarely into one of the attendants. Thinking quickly, she asked:

“Is Mr. Wier still in his office? Mr. Norgil wanted me to see him.”

“I think that Mr. Wier left,” replied the attendant. “But you might try his office.”

Miriam went up the grand staircase. At the top, she looked down. The attendant was out of sight. Quickly, the girl

slipped through the curtains into the Hall of History. The place was empty.

Calmly, Miriam strolled about, viewing a waxwork Napoleon at St. Helena, a kingly Caesar refusing a royal crown, and a great many other interesting exhibits.

Glancing at her wristwatch, she finally noted that the time was twenty minutes past eleven. How the thoughts linked she didn't guess, but suddenly the meaning of the dead man's message came to her.

"H.H." meant Hall of History. Something was to happen here at half past eleven!

Norgil wanted her to be safe. That was it, of course. Naturally he hadn't shown her the message. But Miriam had her own idea of loyalty to Norgil. She decided to stay and see what happened. In a corner she saw a door marked "*Storeroom.*"

Opening it gingerly, Miriam started back at the sight of peering faces. Then she laughed. They were only waxwork dummies, extras, not yet placed on exhibit.

The closet wouldn't be a good hiding place. But it struck Miriam that anyone looking there would not notice one more dummy. She had another idea, and a good one. On a platform at the back of the hall were a group of waxworks representing Belshazzar's Feast. Beside the bearded king who sat upon a stately throne was a female cupbearer clad in short tunic and sandals. The waxwork girl happened to be a brunette, like Miriam.

Urged by her own inspiration, Miriam carried the light figure to the closet. She removed the tunic, which covered one arm and came just below the other, then took the sandals that were on the figure's feet. Stowing the dummy deep among the others, Miriam glanced at her wristwatch.

The time was 11:25. For a moment Miriam hesitated, then determinedly she began to remove her own clothes. Though she worked rapidly, she managed to keep calm until

she had nearly disrobed. Then she was seized by mad panic at the realization of her possible predicament—if she did not complete the change within the next few minutes.

Flinging the last of her garments to the floor, Miriam grabbed for the tunic and started to put it on backward. Hurriedly correcting that error, she finally snapped the single shoulder buckle and quickly slid the sandals onto her bare feet. Shoving her own clothes deep on a closet shelf, she was about to scamper out to the platform when she remembered that Babylonian damsels did not wear wristwatches. Unclamping the band around her wrist, she added the watch to the garments on the shelf.

Reaching the spot beside Belshazzar's throne, Miriam felt her heart thump so loudly that she thought the sound would carry throughout the entire hall. At last the pit-pats lessened; she felt calm again. A long minute passed. There was a stir from the entrance curtains.

People came into the hall. Miriam recognized them as persons who had been in the audience during the show. They totaled six; five were men, one was a woman. They clustered near the platform where Miriam stood as motionless as the waxwork figures. They didn't notice anything amiss.

Nor did Miriam, until a dry voice spoke at her very elbow: "You may take this cup, Miss Laymond."

If Miriam hadn't been petrified, she might have jumped right out of her Babylonian costume. A hand plucked Miriam's arm, bringing her about. Belshazzar handed her his cup.

Astonished, she reached mechanically to receive it. Then, rising, the ancient king plucked off his beard, revealing himself as Harmon Wier.

Throwing aside his robe, Wier displayed his usual clothes beneath. The grinning members of his mob had drawn revolvers. Miriam was covered by the circle of guns as Wier

seized her arm roughly and drew her down from the platform.

"I had to croak Jarvey," he told the rest. "He came to the office ahead of time, with his usual hints for more than his cut of the dough as a price for keeping his trap shut."

Pleased mutters approved Wier's admission of murder.

"Norgil suspected something," continued the killer. "So he planted this dame here to look in on us. Only she didn't figure that there would be two of us playing the dummy act."

Laughs greeted Wier's sally. Miriam bit her lips, more in humiliation than in fear. She heard Wier inquire if the trucks had arrived.

The reply was yes, and that the attendants were closing the place for the night. Turning to the one woman member of the band, Wier gave an order that concerned Miriam.

"You keep this dame covered, Boots," he said, "until I get back. We're going down by the back route."

Pulling away a curtain in back of the Belshazzar group, Wier pressed a panel. When it came open, Miriam saw an elevator. She realized then how easily Wier had removed the body from his office. With everyone at Norgil's show, he had slid out at the first signs of the dripping blood. He had carried Jarvey's dead form through the Hall of History and taken it down to the Chamber of Horrors.

At Wier's order, one of the crooks went to the closet, found Miriam's clothes on the shelf and took them along with him when he joined Wier and the other men in the elevator. Then the car was gone, and Miriam, still biting her lips, was wishing that she had chosen one of the ample Eskimo costumes that she could see on the Admiral Peary platform rather than the three-piece outfit—one tunic and two sandals—which she had picked for her present dilemma.

She hadn't been forgotten, however. Soon the elevator returned. Wier was its only passenger except for a kneeling waxwork figure that was clad in a long black dress. Wier

shoved the figure from the elevator and made a mock bow.

"Introducing Marie Antoinette," he said. "You're going to be a queen, Miss Laymond." Then, turning to the girl with the gun, he added: "I'll be back in five minutes. Make her hurry the change and put the cupbearer figure where it belongs, in case any of those boob attendants come in here before they go home. Let her do all the work, so you can keep her covered."

Wier went back into the elevator, and Boots promptly poked Miriam with the gun, telling her to get busy. Knowing that Wier was coming back, Miriam did not stall.

Fuming at her own folly, she transferred her Babylonian costume to the dummy in the closet and carried the cupbearer to its proper place on the platform. Taking the dress from the Antoinette dummy, she put it on and added stockings that she found with the figure. Antoinette's shoes, however, were too narrow.

"Forget 'em," snapped Boots, "and put the dummy in the closet. Make it snappy. Here's Wier."

Flanked by two guns, Miriam descended in the elevator, feeling, she decided, much as Marie Antoinette must have felt while on the way to the guillotine. That sensation was justified when they reached the Chamber of Horrors. There, Wier told the black-gowned girl to kneel behind the guillotine and place her head beneath the ax. Miriam obliged, there being nothing else to do.

"Look along there"—Wier pointed down the blue-lit passage—"and see old Simon Legree, ready to take a whack at Uncle Tom. We stuck the Legree dummy up near the top of the maze, where nobody goes, and the guy you see is real.

"He's our lookout. And besides, if he thumps that whip down, it will hit the plate that controls this guillotine. You'll be a real martyr"—Wier and Boots were locking Miriam in

place, while the big shot made his threat—"if you just try to make a squawk.

"Maybe all the attendants have gone; maybe they haven't. We're not bothering them because they're on the level. I'm using them for an alibi. I'm telling you this because you'll never blab. You can still hope for the best"—he chuckled—"which will be that the mob will take you along—with the swag!"

That verdict given, Wier motioned to Boots. Together they headed for the deep end of the passage, while Miriam, her face motionless but very pale, let her eyes turn to watch them.

Norgil would have liked those eyes more than ever had he seen them. For the expression that they bore was one of hope that the magician, known for his skill at performing the impossible, would somehow come to Miriam's rescue.

Chapter V

FINISHED CRIME

FROM THAT moment on, Miriam could scarcely believe the things that happened. Yet happen they did, exactly as she saw and heard them. At moments she understood clearly, but there were intervals when all seemed a dream, induced, perhaps, by the cold blue glow and peculiar acoustics found in the vaulted Chamber of Horrors.

First, Wier and Boots went to the last exhibit in the row, one past the exit that led through the mystic maze. Miriam hadn't noticed that exhibit before. It was the one that represented the famous Bluebeard's secret room.

The scene was an interior view. A dummy figure representing

Bluebeard stood gloating at the sight of hanging heads—all suspended by their hair. Beautiful heads, as Miriam saw them, with every shade of hair. They gave her the shivery thought that if someone interfered with Wier, her own head would be loose like those.

That, in a way, steeled her to watch what happened next. Since the exhibit showed the interior of the secret room, the background naturally had the locked doors which Bluebeard's wives, as represented by the heads, had been told never to open. Harmon Wier was taking the privilege of Bluebeard. He was opening the doors.

Beyond, Miriam saw a rough-hewn passage, like an extension to the Chamber of Horrors. Wier's crew was coming through it, stacking bags in front of their chief. Wier opened one bag and dipped his hand in it. His fingers trickled jewels.

That passage led to Clafley's jewelry store! That was why workmen had still been busy in the New Eden Musee! The waxwork exhibits, on which Wier was losing money, made the front for a clever scheme to burrow into one of Manhattan's greatest storehouses of gems and rifle the place clean!

Wier was looking in Miriam's direction. She let her eyes stare straight ahead. The sound of footfalls made her fearful, until she heard Wier laugh. It wasn't a real attendant that was coming along the passage. It was the robot, on his electrical track.

The mechanical creature halted close to Miriam. Its glassy eyes stared dully into hers. Then the thing was on its way again, jerkily advancing through the hazy blue light. It struck the wall and came back. Following its course, Miriam saw that Wier and Boots had moved into the tunnel along with the rest. Then she watched the robot going back along the passage, until her eyes bothered her. Staring straight ahead, Miriam resigned herself to the guillotine.

Mechanical paces halted and jerked ahead. They faded and

finally began their return. There was no other sound along the passage until Miriam heard a whisper that might have come from anywhere, thanks to the vaulted roof. It said:

“Look at Simon Legree!”

Before doing that, Miriam took a glance toward the tunnel. No one was in sight. She turned her head and stared past the advancing robot. She saw the dummy figure of Uncle Tom, but the real shape of Simon Legree was no longer in that exhibit which stood at the end of the passage opposite the Bluebeard den!

The robot hit the wall, clicked about, and began its return. Again Miriam heard the whisper—one that she had to believe, since it had been true before:

“Break loose. Make for the maze!”

Breaking loose was not difficult. The bonds that held Miriam Laymond, alias Marie Antoinette, were formidable only because they could hold her long enough for the guillotine to be dropped. But with the lookout gone, there wasn't any chance that the knife would fall. Working hard, Miriam snapped the thin chains that held her wrists, then worked the others down from her ankles and over her shoeless feet.

There were voices from the tunnel. Frantically, Miriam scrambled out from behind the guillotine and made for the turnstile into the maze. As she wheeled through it, she looked along the passage. The robot figure was gone, but to her amazement Simon Legree was back!

The girl could still see the blue-lit passage from the cross-bars of the maze. Then, as she went through another turnstile, hands suddenly gripped her. Before she could scream, she was clamped in a strong grip. A hand was held across her mouth; a voice, friendly enough, whispered that she should keep quiet.

Wier was coming out past Bluebeard, with his mob at his heels. They were carrying bags, two to a man, Boots hauling

a pair of satchels like the rest. Wier was pointing the way by the long route through the passages when suddenly Boots questioned:

"Where's the dame?"

Wier gave a snarl. Looking along the passage, he called in a low tone that echoed back at him:

"Hey, Klinky!"

He was talking to the figure of Simon Legree, but it did not answer. Wier dropped one bag and pulled a revolver. The rest copied his move. Staring steadily, Wier asked the others:

"What's happened to that dummy that was walking around here? It's quit!"

Almost in answer a figure swung past the turn of the corridor, but it wasn't uniformed as an attendant. The form that paced into view was that of a uniformed officer, gun in hand. Behind him poked others, who stood back, letting their leader advance. Before any of the police could shout, "Stick 'em up!" Wier gave the rasped order to his own mob:

"It's the cops! Give it!"

The whole crew gave it as they surged forward. The police began to sprawl like dummy figures—which they were. When Wier and his outfit came upon them it was too late. They were past the turn in the corridor. From that spot came a drive of real police in plainclothes, who opened an effective barrage of gunfire.

Fleeing back along the passage, Wier and a few others made toward the tunnel. Shouts came from the hewn cavity. Uniformed policemen—not dummies this time—came into sight, using their revolvers. With more of his band dropping behind him, Wier made for the only outlet, the mystic maze.

The men beside Miriam arose. Their flashlights bored into the blue glow of the Horror Chamber. When Wier tried to shoot, they riddled him. Then gun echoes died. Amid the groans of wounded crooks came the screech of Boots, the

only one of the mob who had dodged the fire to be captured by a trio of detectives.

Taken to the main hall on the ground floor, Miriam gave a glad cry when she saw Norgil, removing the costume of an attendant which he had put over his own clothes. His arms received a very weepy young lady, who still wore the plain black dress and stockings that belonged to the dummy, Marie Antoinette.

"We knew what they were up to," explained Norgil. "I came in again, packed in the crates, with half a dozen headquarters men. In order to see how things were going, I put on an attendant's uniform and took the place of the walking robot."

"But . . . but—" Miriam was stammering, amazed. "What about Simon Legree?"

"We covered the maze, of course," returned Norgil, "and found the dummy there. Klinky was wearing a duplicate outfit. All I did was pick him out while he was staring at Uncle Tom and tap him one under the ear. He wasn't paying any attention to the walking robot."

"But the police?"

"The ones that got shot? They were the moving dummies, headed by the real robot. We brought in some uniforms and toggled them up in those."

Miriam didn't ask about the men who had awaited her in the maze. She knew that they were detectives. She also knew that it was Norgil who had spoken to her while passing. She wanted to know more about that. He told her.

"You didn't go to the hotel," he said. "I knew then that you had found the message. I was looking for you, and I saw you, because you watched me pass. Besides, we found a kneeling dummy up in the Hall of History, along with extra shoes, and this"—he dangled a wristwatch—"was on the shelf. I guess"—he smiled as he eyed Miriam's costume—"they took

everything else you had worn, but they overlooked this. You left a wide trail, like Wier."

"Like Wier?"

Norgil nodded.

"I wasn't bluffed," he said. "Wier was losing too much money. That looked phony. There wasn't any red ink on his desk when I was up there earlier. But there were a lot of programs. Funny they ran short of them, wasn't it?"

"No"—Norgil became reflective—"it wasn't funny after all. Wier didn't want any more programs given out for fear someone would check on that St. Valentine's Day massacre set and see one body too many."

Congratulations were coming Norgil's way. Detectives were telling him that he could expect a reward for having halted the huge robbery at Clafley's. The manager was coming to his hotel, they added, to talk the whole case over. Norgil smiled at Miriam.

"Do you know," said the magician with a smile, "I might have let Wier get away with that murder—but never with that robbery."

"Why not?" asked Miriam incredulously.

"You'll find out"—Norgil's smile was elusive—"some day soon."

By some day soon, Norgil meant next Wednesday—her birthday.

The Mystery of Moloch

FOR TWENTY YEARS, Howard Thurston dominated the American magical scene with a full evening show requiring a company of thirty people and two baggage cars, but his big problem was how to crash the columns of big city newspapers with publicity stories that would bring customers to the box office. So one day in Philadelphia I stopped to see the managing editor of the Sun, a new tabloid daily whose star writer, Vivian Shirley, made a specialty of walking along steel girders, jumping into fire nets, exploring watery depths in a diver's suit and whatever else would furnish thrills for regular readers.

I asked the editor: "What about sawing Vivian in half? Or stretching her until her arms and legs are six feet long? Or—" His eyes gleamed an interruption, so I said no more. When he asked, "You mean by Thurston the Magician?" I calmly replied: "Who else?"

So we settled on Thurston's new illusion, "Stretching a Woman," and the next night Vivian Shirley popped up in the audience and challenged Thurston to stretch her instead of the girl who regularly underwent the ordeal. Thurston accepted, and the audience burst into vociferous applause as they watched their favorite newswriter undergo the test, which made a grueling full-page story in the next day's Sun, complete with pictures.

Later, I wondered what might result if such a situation should occur spontaneously under circumstances demanding immediate action. You will find out in the following story.

The Mystery of Moloch

Chapter I THE GIRL WHO VANISHED

THE MATINEE WAS nearly over, and Norgil, standing stage center, was gazing solemnly at an audience that sat strangely hushed. Out of that silence, the low thrum of drums rose slowly from the orchestra pit; then came a fanfare of wild, pagan music that shivered the listeners with its discord.

The thing beside Norgil seemed to grin and like it. Great torches, flickering from the hands of robed assistants, supplied the illusion of living features to the monster's brazen mouth. As the music faded, the magician stretched his hand toward the hideous creature that squatted on its platform and announced, impressively:

"Moloch! The man-made beast of sacrifice, ready to devour a human victim with his all-consuming flame!"

Old Moloch looked as though he could do it. The squatty figure was six feet high and nearly as broad. It bore a resemblance to a bull, but it was mostly head, with jaws that

could open wider than the muzzle of a Big Bertha.

At present, Moloch had his mouth shut, but when Norgil mentioned his fiery propensities, the figure obligingly snorted smoke through his brassy nostrils. Fritz actually supplied those jets by handling the valve of the steam hose backstage. But the shrieks from the theater told that the audience did not link Norgil's assistant with the phenomenon. At their present pitch, the spectators were ready to accept the snorts as Moloch's own idea.

The procession entered from the wing. Miriam Laymond was to be the victim; clad in abbreviated skirt and tunic, the show's leading lady looked like some bygone princess ready for the sacrifice. The orchestra blared and trumpeted, and the jaws of Moloch opened, disgorging flames that added a roaring accompaniment to the crashing music.

It was time for the comedy relief.

Norgil's upraised hand soothed the orchestra and made Moloch's roars subside. Stepping to the footlights, the magician suavely remarked:

"If there is any lady in the audience who would like to take the victim's place—"

The roar that interrupted did not come from Moloch. It was a gale of laughter supplied by the hardier members of the audience. Houselights came on, and Norgil continued the comedy by looking hopefully among the audience.

"Ah! The lady in the fifth row!" Norgil was stepping to his right. "You would like to try it? Here are the steps"—he was pointing to them—"so come right up. I'm sorry, my mistake."

Turning to the audience in general, Norgil announced in sorrowful tones:

"The lady just fainted. We shall have to use our usual victim, since there is no one else."

Again, flames gushed from the brazen bull. Kettledrums

were throbbing, muffled, while two of the ancient-clad assistants were lifting Miriam toward the fiery jaws. Then, at the most dramatic instant, came an interruption, a girl's shrill shout from somewhere in the audience:

"Wait!"

She was dashing down the side aisle, a trim streak in gray, clutching a hat in one hand, a handbag in the other. She took the steps in pairs, flung herself past Norgil, and cried to the costumed assistants:

"Put me in there instead! Burn me—vanish me! Only hurry!"

Snapping from their astonishment, the assistants grabbed the frantic girl. But they didn't shove her toward Moloch. Thinking she was crazy, they were dragging her away from the flaming monster, when Norgil intervened.

He saw that the girl was white-faced but very earnest, despite her frenzy. With a quick glance, the magician's eye discerned more elsewhere. The commotion hadn't ended in the audience after the girl's rush. Two men were pounding down the same aisle, followed by a flock of excited ushers.

That sight, by the dimming houselights, determined Norgil on the instant. His left hand, thrusting toward the Moloch image, was the cue to thrust the victim into the monster's jaws. His right, snapping its fingers toward the orchestra, brought a blasting crescendo that seemed to shake the theater.

The musicians threw everything at the stage except their instruments, and the burst of trumpets and the smash of drums drowned the shouts of "Stop her!" that the men from the aisle were giving as they took the steps.

Up went the girl in gray, hat, handbag and all. Flames vanished as the brazen Moloch seemed to suck in its breath. Feet first, the girl was thrust into the mammoth mouth; the audience had a flash of her toppling hat. Brass jaws clamped shut, and then—

As the assistants turned to grapple the two men who had

arrived upon the stage, the mouth of Moloch opened. The brazen bull gushed a volley of flame that no blast furnace could have matched. With the finish of that tremendous puff, the monstrous stage prop split apart, on hinges.

The fire was gone; so was the girl!

Such was the Mystery of Moloch, Norgil's new masterpiece of illusion. A shattered idol, a blank platform, a vanished victim, and a guessing audience!

This show, however, had supplied two variations: first, the girl from the audience, and second, the men who had followed her to the stage. They were still to be heard from.

Anger on their faces, they leaped to the platform and grabbed at the brass halves of the bisected Moloch. Scorched hands were the result, and the audience shrieked new laughter, taking the whole thing as comedy.

Norgil's assistants had a different viewpoint. Grabbing the two intruders, they bowled them to the nearest wing and turned them over to the squad of ushers, who promptly chucked them out into the stage alley. The assistants were back again, wheeling away the Moloch platform as the curtain dropped, while Norgil, at the footlights, was taking the plaudits of the audience.

"I am sorry," announced Norgil, in a tone so suave that the audience knew he wasn't serious, "but I cannot produce the victim. She is gone"—he shook his head sadly—"another of them. That makes five this week—"

Pausing, the magician turned toward the wing and beckoned. Miriam stepped before the curtain, still clad in her ancient costume.

"The victim that was spared," said Norgil, brightening. "But you will see the last of her tonight, unless some other lady gets excited and wants to take her place."

Amid the mingling of laughter and applause, Norgil bowed Miriam off the stage. As he followed with her, he undertoned:

"Get the girl away. Find out who she is and hang on to her. I'll see you at Cably's after the show."

Miriam's responding nod came after she had passed the wing and was out of the audience's sight. Then Norgil was returning toward the footlights, and the curtain was rising on another stage set. With the orchestra swinging into lighter music, a new series of rapid-fire magic was under way.

During those speedy moments, even into the swift finale, Fritz and other assistants noted the slight smile on the lips beneath Norgil's pointed mustache and knew why it was there.

Norgil, the purveyor of mysteries, was looking forward to the solution of one riddle that really puzzled him. He was wondering what the girl in gray had fled from that made her seek the fiery jaws of Moloch.

He would have that answer after he talked with the vanished girl herself!

Chapter II

STOLEN GOODS

THE GALAXY Theater, where Norgil was playing, had been classed as ultramodern when it was built, back in the palmy days of vaudeville. Termed a "theater of the future," it had made ample provisions for the actors; its designers had not foreseen that in the real future, droves of human talent would be displaced by double-feature motion pictures.

At any rate, the Galaxy had enough dressing rooms to house a regiment, and they occupied three floors, the center one being at stage level. There were stairs leading to the floor below and the floor above, but nobody used them because the theater also had a backstage elevator.

In the present age of economy, the doorman doubled as elevator operator, which didn't work out very well. When the doorman was off the door, anyone could come backstage, as Norgil found out when he reached his stage-level dressing room after the show.

Comfortably seated near Norgil's dressing table was a pudgy, grinning man named Gruler. He was one of the local amateur magicians, who made up for lack of talent by his ability as a pest. Of all times to have Gruler walk in this was the worst, for Norgil was in a hurry, though he didn't want to show it.

"Hello, Gruler," purred the magician pleasantly. "Help yourself to some more cigars and look over the pressbooks. I'll talk to you after I've changed into something more suitable."

Gruler kept up a piping conversation while Norgil was making the change, but he didn't manage to capture the magician's attention until Norgil was ready to leave. Seeing the magician turning toward the door, Gruler exclaimed:

"Wait! Wait! I'm all ready to show you the trick I was talking about. You tell the sucker to call up any number he wants, and ask the name of the card he took. When he picks up the telephone—"

Gruler turned to a telephone that stood on Norgil's dressing table. Before the fellow could lift the receiver, the magician had him by the back of the neck. Piloting Gruler to the corridor, Norgil locked the dressing room door and put a ten-dollar bill in the astonished amateur's hand.

"I know all about the trick," said Norgil. "Here's the cash you wanted for it. I don't need a demonstration."

"You're going to use it in the show?"

"Of course," replied Norgil, knowing that the promise would pacify Gruler. "But not this week. I wouldn't want to use your trick in your own town. It wouldn't be fair. But I

forgot to tell you that Fritz wants to see you. I was telling him about those ideas of yours that would improve the show. Better go upstairs and see him."

As soon as the pest was in the elevator, Norgil started out through the stage door, only to find that the delay had proven costly. He was blocked by two bulky men who wore derby hats and flashed badges. One of them spoke.

"You're Norgil, huh?" he said. "Well, we're from headquarters. The chief wants to see you."

Norgil showed surprise. The dick gave a grunt.

"You know what it's about," he gruffed. "You thought you were smart, didn't you, helping that girl out and chucking a couple of store detectives out in the alley? Well, you weren't smart. Come on. We're taking you to headquarters."

The slam of a sliding door told Norgil that the elevator had returned to the central floor. Swinging about, he made a dash for the open car, the detectives bellowing "Stop!" as they followed him. The operator, trying to stop Norgil's rush, received a punch that flattened him. Inside the elevator, Norgil slammed the door in the faces of the detectives.

"We've got him boxed!" exclaimed one dick. "There's only two places where that elevator goes. The floor above here, and the one below."

"It's a cinch," agreed the other. "I'll chase upstairs, you hop down. Let's go!"

They went, and the clatter of their heavy feet had hardly died before Norgil opened the very door that he had closed. Stepping from the elevator that he had not even started, he waved a farewell to the half-groggy operator.

"Sorry I had to sock you, Terry. But it will square you with the dicks. Tell them I'll see them later—at headquarters."

With that, Norgil departed by the stage door and covered the few twisty blocks that brought him to Cably's restaurant. He found Miriam and the vanished girl in a little booth at the

back of the place. Smiling, Miriam introduced the girl in gray.

"This is Miss Marvin," she said. "Miss Barbara Marvin, to be more exact. She has quite a lot to tell you."

With Miriam gone, Barbara broke the ice anew by exclaiming over the Moloch Mystery.

"I'd seen the show before," she explained, "so I knew what was going to happen. But it all went so fast—why"—she took a deep breath—"I didn't really know where I was gone, until afterward."

"It works automatically," smiled Norgil. "Just so we know that it will be safe. That's why I put you in it. But tell me: why were you dodging a couple of store detectives? What store were they from?"

Barbara's wistful smile added an attractive dimple to a very pretty face. Confident that Norgil would believe her, she poured out her story. She had been shopping at Borreon's Jewelry Store, a large and pretentious establishment across the street from the Galaxy Theater, when the trouble started.

"I was near the counter where they have the necklace," she explained. "The wonderful ten-thousand-dollar necklace, all diamonds, that belonged to Princess Sonia of Russia. Mr. Borreon had been showing the necklace to an old lady. There was a clerk there, and other people—"

She paused, trying to reconstruct the scene. Norgil purred encouragement:

"Never mind. Tell me what happened."

"I was walking away," resumed Barbara. "I noticed that my handbag was open. Some cards and a few dollar bills were dropping from it. I was stooping to pick them up when Mr. Borreon shouted that the necklace was gone."

"Of course I was startled. I was conspicuous, too. So I grabbed up the dollar bills and started out, trying to get

the money into the bag and close it. People were pointing at me, shouting after me. If I hadn't been at the door, I would have stopped.

"But I was almost outside, so I ran. Even in my excitement, I realized how foolish it was. Then I saw the theater, and I dashed across the street.

"I bought a ticket and hurried inside. Before I could find a seat, I heard them coming after me. You were just ready to do the Moloch trick, and so—"

The girl's breath gave out. She didn't have to tell the rest, for Norgil had witnessed it. Moreover, he regarded her story as entirely plausible, the very thing that would happen to an excited person.

"Tell me about the handbag"—Norgil's expression showed that he was trying to recapture the original scene—"was it open while you were at the diamond counter?"

"I don't know," replied Barbara. "Of course, the bag comes open easily. The clasp is loose"—she lifted the bag and opened it—"and I keep it filled with so many things, such as my handkerchief, my compact, my lipstick—"

"And this."

Norgil's keen eye had caught a glitter deep in the bag while Barbara was fishing for the objects that she mentioned. Sliding his own fingers deeper than the girl's, Norgil brought them out with a swiftness that made Barbara gasp.

That gasp carried more than surprise; it was filled with real dismay. Flashing before Barbara's startled eyes was a brilliant object that branded her whole story as a lie.

Out of the girl's own handbag Norgil had produced the diamond necklace.

Dangling from the magician's hand, the chain of resplendent gems gave evidence of the very theft for which Barbara Marvin was accused!

Chapter III LINKED EVIDENCE

GRAY EYES that matched Barbara's natty garb were pleading, almost tearful, as the girl faced the one man upon whom she had depended. Meeting Norgil's gaze, Barbara found to her new amazement that it carried no accusation whatever.

"The necklace—how it came there—I don't know—"

Barbara's stammers were unnecessary. Norgil quieted them with a soothing interruption.

"The necklace proves your innocence," he declared. "No thief would have handed me the bag, the way you did. You stay with Miriam. I'll take care of this."

Gathering up the necklace, Norgil dropped it in his own pocket and strolled from the booth. Miriam was waiting near the door; Norgil spoke with her a few moments, and she went back to join Barbara.

Outside the restaurant, Norgil took a cab to headquarters and went in to see the police chief. That worthy voiced a rather spluttered greeting, saying that he had just heard from the detectives at the theater.

"They said you wanted to see me," acknowledged Norgil. "I thought I could get here quicker without them, so I came. I understand you merely wanted to question me."

Admitting that such was the case, the police chief finally saw the humor of Norgil's escapade. It didn't occur to him that the stunt had enabled the magician to meet the vanished girl before coming to headquarters. The chief's questions regarding Barbara dealt with what had happened during the show, and Norgil handled all of them smoothly.

"We'd been talking about having a girl come up from the audience," said Norgil, "and I thought that Fritz might have arranged it without telling me. So I went through with it.

"When I came offstage, she was gone. I didn't know those

fellows from the audience were store detectives until your men told me. The ushers were after them when they reached the stage, so my men helped throw the fellows out."

The police chief nodded. He opened a door and conducted Norgil into a reception room, to introduce him to a small throng. While the chief explained matters, Norgil found himself shaking hands all around.

He met James Borreon, who owned the jewelry store: a tall, gray-haired man whose face had a cadaverous look. Borreon reminded Norgil of a professional mourner, but it was probable that the loss of a ten-thousand-dollar necklace had increased the jeweler's melancholy expression.

Next in line was the clerk that Barbara had mentioned. His name was Eddie Rudler, and he had a worried, mouselike expression, produced by Borreon's presence. He seemed to be curbing the fear that he might lose his job, for he smirked and nodded every time that Borreon spoke.

A sleek and rather jocular man took off his glove in order to shake hands with Norgil. He was Frederick Craith, a local man about town and one of Borreon's regular customers. Closest to the scene at the time of the theft, Craith had come to headquarters to give his version of the affair.

There was also a dowager named Mrs. Peterson, the lady mentioned by Barbara. Borreon had shown her the necklace just before it disappeared, but was conducting her to another counter at the time of the commotion. Norgil's friends, the store detectives, were also present, and were soon mollified by his profuse apologies for their treatment at the theater.

Then came what Norgil wanted to hear: a summary of the testimony.

"I had forgotten my order book," declared Borreon. "I turned my back toward the showcase that contained the necklace"—he clamped his hand dramatically upon his heart—"and it was gone!"

Evidently Borreon meant the necklace, not the showcase, although it developed that someone might have lifted both, for when the jeweler described the showcase, he moved his hands to indicate an object about two feet square.

"I told you to lock that little showcase!" Borreon stormed the words at Eddie, the mousy clerk. "Just as I always do. Your negligence enabled that thieving Marvin girl to take the necklace."

Eddie's mouth went through fishlike contortions and finally managed to produce a mouse squeak. However, he was a man, not a mouse, in what he finally said.

"I am certain, Mr. Borreon, that you said nothing about locking the showcase. Of course"—Eddie was quick with the correction—"it may be that I did not hear you. I was waiting upon Mr. Craith at the moment, sir, furnishing him with diamond cuff links. It may be—"

"Did you hear me, Mr. Craith?" demanded Borreon.

"Sorry, Borreon, I didn't," returned Craith emphatically. "I shouldn't say sorry, because I don't think your clerk was to blame. But I *am* sorry about the necklace."

Borreon turned to his only ally, Mrs. Peterson. She couldn't recall whether or not the jeweler had spoken to the clerk. Somewhat flustered, the jeweler screwed a smile across his sour face and clapped Eddie on the shoulder.

"I was hasty," said Borreon. "I'm quite sure I meant to speak to you. Perhaps I merely muttered what I intended to say. Since Mr. Craith did not hear me, you could not have. I was wrong to blame you without thinking."

Eddie's face showed its first real smile. Borreon began to rebuke the store detectives, but like other persons, they hadn't been close enough to grab Barbara. They had learned the girl's name from cards that had dropped from her handbag; that was all.

"Suppose I take the blame for her escape," inserted Norgil.

"I vanished her, necklace and all.

"Of course, I was in a bad spot. You'd have to see the Moloch Mystery to understand it. At least"—he smiled affably—"I can offer all of you passes to the show in return for my shortcomings."

Norgil actually fingered the missing necklace while he was hunting for his pass pad. But he didn't bring it into sight, nor did he produce the passes even when he found them.

"I'm absent-minded, too," remarked the magician, glancing at Borreon. "I don't seem to have my pad with me. But I'll get your addresses from the police chief and send the passes to you. I'd like you all to see the show tonight. We're putting on the spook cabinet at the finish, and it's always a big surprise."

A while later, Norgil knocked at the door of Miriam's dressing room in the Galaxy Theater. Admitted, he found Barbara there with Miriam. Backstage was the safest place for the missing girl to be, since the headquarters men had scoured the dressing rooms before they left.

Norgil gave Barbara a note that he had scribbled on the back of an envelope.

"I want you to copy that twice," he said, "and sign your own name to each note."

While Norgil was making out passes and tucking them into envelopes he heard Barbara gasp.

"Why—why!" The girl almost lost her voice. "This . . . this would practically incriminate me!"

"I know it," replied Norgil. "That's what I want you to do. Incriminate yourself—not just once, but twice."

Then, while he was addressing the envelopes that held the passes, Norgil smoothly explained the scheme that he had in mind and the reasons that lay behind it.

Barbara Marvin, listening, was filled with whole-hearted admiration for the genius of Norgil the magician.

Chapter IV

THE SHOW GOES ON

HALF AN hour before the evening show, Norgil met Fritz in front of the Galaxy Theater. He asked the assistant if he had delivered the passes, and Fritz nodded.

"To everybody in person," he said. "I just said you'd sent me, and handed over an envelope. Wait—I forgot about Mrs. Peterson. I didn't see her, so I gave the envelope to the maid."

Mrs. Peterson didn't matter, for Norgil had already figured that she wouldn't come to the show. Lingerin in the lobby, he chatted with the theater manager, at the same time watching for noses as they passed.

Norgil saw the police chief enter the theater. Later, Eddie Rudler used his pass, as did Frederick Craith. The store detectives showed up together, but James Borreon didn't appear until Norgil had nearly given him up.

The magician was pleased to see the jeweler. Tonight's show, in a sense, was to be for Borreon's benefit, although the sour-faced man didn't know it. Noting Norgil with the theater manager, Mr. Borreon dropped his morgue-keeper's manner and stopped to chat.

Borreon knew the theater manager, and the latter offered him a box seat. The two went in together; finishing a cigarette, Norgil followed. Norgil was taking the short route that led backstage. Following a side aisle, he passed the boxes, slid back a fireproof door, went by the electrician's big switchboard, and reached the corridor to the dressing rooms.

Terry wasn't in the elevator. Norgil had given him a ten-dollar bill, five dollars to soothe his sore jaw and the other five to keep him at his regular post near the door. The people in the show were using the stairways. They knew that something was afoot, and they agreed with Norgil that Terry's job was to prevent the entry of unwelcome visitors.

Norgil was dressed when the dressing room lights blinked the five-minute signal. A quick rap sounded at the door; Norgil admitted Barbara Marvin.

"I've rehearsed the act," the girl began eagerly. "I'm ready, except for the costume——"

"And this."

Reaching to his ordinary coat, Norgil brought out the diamond necklace and handed it to the girl. She turned toward the door and stopped short, with a very hopeless cry.

Norgil saw what had happened as he looked into the dressing table mirror. Turning about, he let his hands rise along with Barbara's. Both were covered with a gun, held by a cadaverous man who had stepped from the dressing room's curtained closet.

James Borreon supplied a sneer that went nicely with his appearance.

"I suspected this," said the jeweler. "The two of you, in collusion. Caught with the goods. Wait until the police chief hears of this!"

"Don't tell him until after the show," pleaded Norgil. "I think"—he paused and let his lips twitch—"I think he's out front, ready to watch the show. I'm sure you won't get him if you phone headquarters."

The words had the very effect that Norgil wanted: just the opposite of what Borreon thought the magician sought. To show his own superiority of judgment, Borreon decided to call headquarters. Plucking the necklace from Barbara's hand, he slid it over his wrist. Keeping the pair covered, he circled to the telephone that stood on Norgil's dressing table.

All that Borreon had to do was lift the telephone receiver, because the instrument was not of the dial type. But Borreon did not get far with his call to headquarters.

A terrific report burst through the room, accompanied by a flash of flame. Borreon flew backward, overturning his

chair. His gun left his hand as he landed; scrambling to regain it, Borreon halted. Norgil had whipped out a revolver and was covering him.

Picking up the jeweler's gun, Norgil leveled it, then handed his own revolver to Borreon.

"Just a stage revolver," purred the magician, "loaded with blanks. I prefer yours, Borreon, for the present."

Barbara was staring at the telephone. The instrument had come apart, and smoke was pouring from its hollow standard.

"It's a phony," Norgil told her, not realizing that he had made a pun. "I bought it from a nut named Gruler. You get a fellow to call up a number, and the thing goes off like a cannon. Gruler's idea of a clever trick.

"He had it loaded this afternoon and wanted me to see it work. I gave him ten dollars for it, just to get rid of him and save my eardrums. I guess I was wrong, calling it a bum trick. It has some merit after all."

The dressing room door swung open. Fritz was in the corridor, exclaiming excitedly:

"They're ready for the curtain—"

"So am I," intervened Norgil. "Emergency schedule tonight, Fritz. Let Pete handle your job backstage. I want you to go along with Mr. Borreon"—he gestured toward the still bewildered jeweler—"and show him to a box seat.

"This gun is his, so take it with you. Keep it for him, Fritz, with the muzzle right against his back. We want him to know it still belongs to him, and we want him to see the show. He's going to enjoy the finish."

Fritz marched Borreon through the connecting door, back to the empty theater box from which the jeweler had sneaked in order to reach the dressing room ahead of Norgil. Meanwhile the magician was picking up the necklace from the floor near the dressing table, where Borreon had dropped it. Giving the gems to Barbara, Norgil hurried to the stage,

arriving as the curtain whistled up the wires.

Barbara did not see the first part of the show. She was in Miriam's dressing room, discarding her own clothes for a single tight-fitting garment that looked like an elongated jersey. Entirely black, the garment fitted her like a skin, and when she had pulled its cowl down over her face the girl had the appearance of a giant cat.

While she made that change, Barbara could hear the rise and fade of the orchestra, signifying the swift progress of Norgil's performance. She knew that one dour-faced spectator, James Borreon, would keep his seat until the act was over.

The show had gone on despite the jeweler's effort to prevent it. But its purpose was more than the entertainment of an audience.

Tonight the finale of Norgil's show would be the placing of crime where it belonged!

Chapter V

CRIME'S CLIMAX

MOLOCH HAD swallowed Miriam; girls had vanished and floated in the air. Rabbits and ducks had come and gone, along with hundreds of silk handkerchiefs and huge bowls of goldfish. The stage at last was barren, except for two rows of chairs on each side.

Norgil was at the footlights inviting a committee to come up on the stage. He was sighting friends in the audience, pointing them out and asking them to join the committee. The police chief came. So did Eddie Rudler and Frederick Craith. But James Borreon ignored the invitation.

Stiffly, the jeweler was leaning back in his chair, at Fritz's

suggestion. By leaning back Borreon could tell that he still had his gun, right against his ribs. Just as a reminder, Fritz kept telling him that Norgil always returned people's property after he was through with it.

"You saw him borrow a watch, didn't you?" undertoned Fritz. "The fellow who owned it got it back—and a rabbit with it. Maybe you'll get that necklace, Borreon, and something else besides."

Assistants wheeled a cabinet on the stage. It was the famed spirit cabinet, the abode of spooks. Mounted on a platform, the cabinet had two front doors which Norgil swung open to show an empty interior.

In the sides of the cabinet were diamond-shaped windows from which the spirits had a habit of tossing bells and tambourines whenever they felt frisky. Norgil explained that as he placed the needed implements upon the floor of the cabinet.

A dozen persons were seated on each side of the stage. Approaching one group, Norgil nodded to Eddie Rudler and another man that he had met, then told that half of the committee that they were to watch their side of the cabinet. Going to the other row of chairs, where Frederick Craith was seated, the magician instructed them to guard their flank.

Someone was needed behind the cabinet. Amid cheers that smothered a few unruly catcalls, Norgil delegated the police chief to that duty. Then, facing the audience, the magician solemnly announced:

"Every light in this theater will be extinguished. I want everyone in the audience and the committee on the stage to remain quietly in their seats and look toward the cabinet.

"It will be a few minutes before the manifestations begin. When they do, keep watching, because when the unruly ghost is in the midst of his session I shall call for the lights. Perhaps tonight we can catch the culprit."

A wave of the magician's hand blanketed the theater

completely. A nervous murmur ran through the audience; even the atmosphere seemed chilled by the sudden darkness. A few minutes to wait, but time seemed to pause with every second.

Norgil was listening for cues that he expected. He heard one, a slight *click*; it was followed by another. Then, before the magician could call for the lights, a flash of flame split the darkness. Spurting upward, it loosed a terrifying report.

Borreon had grabbed his gun in the dark. He had fired one shot toward the dome. Norgil didn't give him time for another. The magician's shout to the electrician drowned the echoes of the gun blast.

Along with the audience's belated screams came a brilliant flood of light that covered the whole stage. It showed Borreon stumbling forward from the box, waving his gun excitedly, looking for Norgil as a target. Fritz made a dive from behind and spilled the jeweler to the stage. Other assistants piled upon Borreon, and the police chief lunged forward to add his bulky weight.

But the audience wasn't looking at that pile-up. The cabinet held the center of attention.

The doors of the cabinet were open. On each side stood a frantic, writhing man, his arm thrust through a little window. The opened doors showed their hands locked together, not in a clasp, but by the bracelets of a handcuff.

It wasn't the steel of the manacles that produced the vivid sparkle between those locked wrists. Around the handcuff were the coils of the stolen necklace, its diamonds glittering as they had never shone before. An invisible ghost had regained the ten-thousand-dollar prize, and with it the two crooks who had actually stolen it: Eddie Rudler and Frederick Craith!

They were howling, those two, heaving threats at each other. They were reaching for guns that bulged from their hip

pockets, each anxious to take a shot at the pal who had betrayed him. After that, they would have fired at anyone.

Only they didn't get their guns.

Norgil grabbed Craith before the fellow's hand had left its pocket. Eddie wasn't dangerous. His right wrist was the handcuffed one. It took him too long to stretch his left hand to his right hip. Miriam sprang in from the wing, caught his forearm and thrust it upward until he shrieked surrender.

Borreon, bewildered in the grip of the purple-faced police chief, was facing the cabinet by that time. The jeweler heard Norgil's invitation to claim the necklace and the two crooks with it. Smiling at last, Borreon accepted the gems and let the police chief have the culprits.

There wasn't a doubt that both Eddie and Craith were guilty, as partners in the same crime. Their own wild utterances had given them away. Still baffled by the method of their trapping, each tried to pin the whole job on the other and thereby proclaimed their double guilt.

It was a guilt that Norgil had fathomed that afternoon. He explained it later in his dressing room to Borreon and the police chief, while Barbara, again in her own clothes of gray, listened to the facts that vindicated her.

"Knowing that Miss Marvin was not guilty," said Norgil, "it was obvious that whoever took the necklace dropped it into her handbag, intending to follow her and regain it later. That is a regular system among jewel thieves. They plant the goods temporarily upon innocent persons.

"Craith was the one man in a position to work that stunt. But it was odd that he, the logical thief, should protect Eddie, the clerk, for any suspicion of Eddie would help Craith. The answer was that they were working together. Eddie left the showcase open so that Craith could take the necklace."

Norgil's logic was sound. However, the slick supporting testimony of the crooks had fooled everyone but the magician.

There was another point that Norgil mentioned: neither Eddie nor Craith had started the pursuit of Barbara. That had been begun by the store detectives.

From the dressing table, Norgil picked up the duplicate notes that Barbara had written. The police chief had found one on Eddie, the other on Craith. Norgil read aloud:

"I bluffed the magician and got away with it. I'm with the show, working the spook cabinet. Reach through the window tonight and I'll shove you the sparklers. Keep kidding the sap who thinks he's working with you.

Barbara."

Beside the notes, Norgil placed crumpled envelopes, one addressed to Eddie Rudler, the other to Frederick Craith.

"Each received a note," said Norgil, "sealed in the envelope with the promised pass. When Fritz delivered the passes"—Norgil paused and turned to his assistant, who was chuckling from the doorway—"tell us what you did, Fritz."

"Just what you told me to do," replied Fritz. "I gave each guy the other's envelope."

Enlightenment struck the listeners. It was Borreon who exclaimed:

"Then Eddie thought that Craith purposely passed the necklace to the girl! That they intended to divide, leaving Eddie out!"

"And Craith thought that Eddie had planted the girl!" blurted the police chief. "So that those two could go fifty-fifty, making Craith the fall guy!"

Norgil nodded.

"And remember"—the magician was taking off his dress collar and white bow tie—"each crook thought that he had received the *only* note. Each had the idea that Barbara would hand him the necklace, by mistake, in the darkness.

"Each saw a chance to get the swag all for himself and turn the game on a double-crosser. So Barbara gave them both the necklace, and a pair of bracelets with it."

The group had started out into the corridor so that Norgil could continue with his change of attire. Staring back, they saw the magician in his shirtsleeves, smiling from the doorway, as he took his final bow for the night's performance.

Norgil's bow was given to all, but his smile was meant for Barbara Marvin, the girl who had vanished under a cloud of guilt to reappear only after she herself—through Norgil's aid—had placed the evidence of crime upon its perpetrators!

\$5,000 Reward

THE HISTORY of modern magic is filled with challenges, dating from early rivalries between wizards who outboasted one another on through the period when magicians branded spirit mediums as frauds, only to have the mediums claim that magicians were fakers in their own right. This reached a peak during the era of the *Escape Kings*, who challenged people to bring their own handcuffs to the theater and watch the performer shake them off. Rivals took advantage of this to send trouble-makers up on the stage with cuffs formidable enough to lock the escape artist so securely that they had to be sawed off from his wrists.

Houdini was one of the few *Escape Kings* who stayed in business during all that tumult, but even he dropped handcuffs in favor of more spectacular escapes in which the public was invited to furnish trunks, packing boxes, safes, boilers, coffins and a variety of other impressive devices from which escape was seemingly impossible. This set a vogue that continued after Houdini's death, and even magicians who seldom performed escape acts were often willing to accept such challenges if they offered sufficient publicity to insure a big box office return.

So it was only logical that Norgil, as a fictional magician, should run true to factual form and issue a challenge backed with a cash reward when he saw a chance to put on an escape act of the sort that couldn't fail.

Or could it?

Read on and find out.

\$5,000 Reward

Chapter I NORGIL LOOKS AHEAD

A FAIR-SIZED CROWD was gathered in front of the bulletin board outside the office of the Wilmingdale *Evening Item*. Newly arrived in town, Norgil paused in his stroll to look over intervening shoulders.

The magician smiled at what he saw. The people were looking at a printed notice which stated:

\$5000 REWARD
For the Capture and
Imprisonment of
NORGIL THE MAGICIAN

Beneath that glaring statement were further terms. Norgil was to be captured on his own stage at the conclusion of his final show in Wilmingdale. He was to be imprisoned in handcuffs, shackles, packing-box, or a specially built police cell—anything the “captors” preferred.

Should Norgil fail to make his escape within a period of one hour, he would personally forfeit the sum of five thousand dollars to the person who managed to ensnare him.

The stunt was one that Norgil had staged in many towns, and usually the local police were the ones who accepted the challenge. So far, none had managed to collect the reward money, and Norgil's publicity agent, Steve Cragey, had promised to talk the Wilmingdale police into taking a try at it.

The reward poster was Steve's latest idea to rouse public interest in the stunt. Strolling along toward the city hall, where he was to meet Cragey, Norgil began to wonder if Steve hadn't gone a bit too strong with the thing. Mentally, Norgil argued that the police might not like the placards, and as he neared the chief's office, he learned that he was right.

A booming voice was echoing along the corridor, and when Norgil entered the office, he stepped into the middle of a stormy scene. Wainwright, the police chief, was showing just how loudly he could answer.

Big of build, with a broad face that had gone purple, Chief Wainwright was alternately pounding the desk and shaking a huge fist under the nose of Steve Cragey, smothering every statement that Norgil's publicity man tried to make.

"I'll have none of it!" roared Wainwright, banging the desk as he spoke. "Here we are, ready to post a reward of our own for the arrest and conviction of a masked crook who held up a payroll truck and robbed a department store. Before we can get the reward notices printed, you come along and plaster your advertisements all over town!"

Steve tried to protest that he hadn't heard of the robberies and therefore could not have known about the reward. The police chief snorted.

"The papers have been full of it," he said, "and any of these gentlemen can tell you"—he waved his big hand toward a committee of three silent witnesses—"that the reward we're

offering is five thousand dollars, the same amount as in that freak notice of yours."

Stepping in at that moment, Norgil suavely introduced himself to the police chief. Pulling out a pack of cards, the magician began a few fancy shuffles, meanwhile rebuking Steve and ordering him to have the offending posters removed. He showed Chief Wainwright a few card tricks that left the official mystified. With matters smoothed, Norgil inquired:

"How about it, chief? If we build a nice jail cell on the stage, according to your own specifications, will you lock me in it—on the chance of collecting five thousand dollars?"

Though mollified, Chief Wainwright shook his head.

"You'd get out of it, Norgil," he affirmed, "because getting out of things like that is your business—just like those card tricks. With this masked holdup guy still unknown and at large, everybody would give me the ha-ha after you escaped. Maybe some of these chaps can help you, though."

He turned to introduce the three men in the office. They were a local committee that Steve Cragey had formed to help him persuade the police chief. All were businessmen whose names had been suggested by the manager of the Apex Theater, where Norgil's show was to open that afternoon.

Norgil shook hands with Rodney Brighton, a rather stoop-shouldered, elderly jeweler, whose thin, dryish features seemed to express regret that he had agreed to serve on the committee. Next in line was James Kendry, manager of a chain store. Long-faced and very solemn, Kendry treated the matter as something of the utmost importance, particularly because he had already filled his store windows with a lot of Steve's placards and was anxious to get back and have them removed.

The last man was the only one inclined to be jocular. Chief Wainwright introduced him as Harold Greebe, a real

estate operator. He added that Greebe had formerly been a local banker, a rather unwise comment, for Norgil noticed a passing wince upon Greebe's rugged, square-jawed face.

Then, covering his chagrin with a smile, Greebe talked business in a cool, steady tone.

"The stunt is a good one," he told Norgil. "We want it to go through because it will bring business to the local merchants. But there's another angle, one that I want to put frankly: Is there any catch to this five thousand dollar proposition of yours?"

"None at all," returned Norgil. "You or anyone else can provide whatever you want me to escape from. If it's anything within reason I'll stake my five thousand on it."

Greebe's smile increased. With that show of interest, he gave a sidelong glance at the police chief, then asked Norgil:

"How about a bank vault?"

"My specialty," replied the magician. "Unfortunately, vaults aren't portable. The escape won't do for the stage."

"You offered to build a police cell," reminded Greebe. "Suppose you build a brick vault, instead, to the dimensions I give you. When the vault is ready, I can provide the door."

Norgil agreed. Steve produced a typewritten form and made some changes in it. Instead of specifying that Norgil would escape from a specially built cell, the agreement was altered to describe a vault. Greebe's name replaced that of Chief Wainwright, who agreed to serve on the committee with Brighton and Kendry.

The three businessmen went their way. Last to go was Greebe. His firm lips were holding back a smile as he gave Norgil a strong handclasp, but there was a glitter in Greebe's eyes that the magician did not like.

"You're due for a tough proposition, Norgil," warned Wainwright, when Greebe was gone. "That fellow needs money mighty bad. He used to be president of the Wilmingdale Trust

Co., before it failed. He went into real estate hoping to sell mortgaged property that the bank was stuck with. But he hasn't had much luck."

"And when I build the brick vault," inserted Norgil, "I suppose that Greebe will provide the door from the vault of the old Wilmingdale Trust Co.?"

"That's right," returned the chief, "and it's as modern as they make them. If you can crack that door, Norgil, I'll bet that you can bust out of anything."

Steve Cragey was chuckling when he and Norgil rode back to their hotel in a taxicab.

"It's funny about police chiefs," said Steve. "Like everybody else, they never figure that vaults are made to keep people from getting *into* them, not to keep people from getting *out*."

"Why, with all you know about vault doors, Norgil, the stunt will be a setup. You can take off the inner plate and get at the mechanism—"

Steve didn't finish. He noticed that Norgil's eyes had a faraway stare, as if they were piercing the veil of the future. When Norgil displayed that gaze it invariably meant that matters were never as they seemed to be.

Norgil was thinking in terms of bankers, not police chiefs. He hadn't forgotten the triumphant glitter in Greebe's eyes. Picturing himself in Greebe's position, Norgil was considering something that might very well have occurred to the rugged-faced gentleman who wanted to claim five thousand dollars.

His own reputation dependent upon Greebe's move, Norgil was looking ahead and seeing trouble.

Amid that mental preview, Norgil could fancy the flutter of five thousand paper dollars, floating from his own coffers into those of Harold Greebe!

Chapter II

THE FINAL NIGHT

EVEN WITH Norgil's posters gone, the town of Wilmingdale was agog during the next few days, looking forward to the big stunt that was to mark the finish of the magician's three-day stand. The police had posted their notice of five thousand dollars for the arrest and conviction of a "person unknown," and the citizens were comparing Norgil's challenge to Greebe in terms of the law's effort to snare the unidentified crook.

It was obvious that the last night would be a sellout; and Norgil, therefore, was interested in the career of the unknown criminal whose opportune misdeeds were producing good business at the theater.

The newspapers referred to the mysterious crook as the "Masked Marauder" because he had worn a mask during his daring and profitable raids. He was also termed a lone wolf on account of his single-handed methods, but judging from the crook's quick getaway after each crime and the amount of shooting that had gone on, the Masked Marauder evidently had the backing of a gang.

Norgil's interest in the Masked Marauder annoyed Steve Cragey, who by this time had lost all worry regarding the outcome of the vault escape.

"Let the police chief think about the crook," advised Steve, while he and Norgil were entering the stage door. "What's bothering me is Greebe. Here it is, seven o'clock, and the show goes on at eight-thirty with the vault escape at ten. You've got your brick vault built, but Greebe hasn't shown up with the door."

Greebe was on the stage when they arrived there. He was chatting with Miriam Laymond, Norgil's leading lady, while he inspected the brick vault. Half the size of a trailer, the vault had a steel floor and ceiling, the sides and back being of brick. It

was mounted on casters so that it could be rolled on stage, and the front was an open frame ready to receive Greebe's steel door.

A truck rumbled into the stage alley while Greebe was shaking hands. Steve Cragey looked at his watch.

"That truck is here early," he said. "It isn't due until ten-thirty. We're going to start packing the show to get it down to the depot while Norgil is escaping from the vault."

Greebe grinned at the sally.

"The truck is bringing the steel door," he stated. "I'd like you all to be here while I have the men fit it to the vault."

The steel door was rolled on stage in a wheeled cradle manned by four husky truckers. They shoved it up against the front of the portable vault.

"It don't fit," grumbled one man. "How come, Mr. Greebe?"

"Turn it around," suggested Greebe, with a chuckle, "so that the front of the door faces the interior of the vault."

Greebe looked at Norgil during the process. The lips beneath the magician's mustache were very straight; his eyes remained steady. But portly Steve Cragey nearly did a two-hundred-and-thirty-pound collapse in the center of the stage.

"Vault doors go outward!" Steve finally manged to sputter. "So people can look at the dials from the front—"

"Not this door!" inserted Greebe smoothly. "If Norgil can't guess that combination in an hour"—he thwacked the magician's shoulders as he spoke—"he won't get out. But he'll *be* out"—the jest made Greebe chuckle—"to the tune of five thousand dollars."

With that, Greebe suggested that he and Norgil go over to see the committee, which was to meet at Brighton's jewelry store. Steve couldn't go along as he had business at the theater, so Greebe invited Miriam to come as Norgil's witness.

Whether Greebe had taken a fancy to the trim brunette or merely wanted one of Norgil's company present in case the

magician tried to dispute the terms of the challenge, he did not specify. Anyway, Miriam went along, through a short route of alleys that brought them to an arcade where the jewelry store was located.

Chief Wainwright and James Kendry were present with Rodney Brighton. When Greebe asked for the envelope, Brighton pointed to the desk. Greebe picked up an open envelope and looked at the paper that it contained. Sealing the envelope, he handed it to Chief Wainwright.

"The combination to the vault door," Greebe told Norgil. "I had the committee members test it at the bank. Chief Wainwright can check it later after he lets you out."

Wainwright looked puzzled until Greebe related how he had reversed the steel door before putting it on the wheeled vault. As the situation dawned on the police chief, his eyes popped wide and his lips spread in a grin directed toward Norgil. Solemn blinks were Kendry's reaction, while Brighton showed annoyance at the whole affair.

"Take good care of Norgil," Greebe told the committee. "I have to go out of town to handle a real estate deal but I hope to be back by eleven. I just want to be sure"—Greebe was stroking his chin thoughtfully—"that Norgil doesn't disappear when his act is over."

"Don't worry," assured Norgil. "I'll go through with the escape, Greebe. What's more, I'll be out of that vault long before the hour's time limit is up."

For once, it seemed to Miriam that Norgil's tone was overboastful. She realized that he could have foreseen Greebe's trick of putting the door the wrong way about, but Norgil had apparently taken the chance that it wouldn't happen. Miriam was watching Norgil steadily while she listened to the final arrangements.

Chief Wainwright was promising to keep an eye on the magician, and James Kendry agreed to do the same. Rodney

Brighton was wheezily insisting that he did not have the time to spare, that he always remained late at the jewelry store. So Greebe obligingly agreed that Brighton could come to the theater whenever he chose.

When Norgil left the jewelry store with Miriam, the police chief accompanied them. Still somewhat irked over the matter of Steve's posters, Chief Wainwright was warming up to his new duty. He relished the prospect of Greebe's success and wanted to have a share in it. The chief was thinking that such policy would offset public criticism of his inability to trap the crook known as the Masked Marauder.

From the moment that Norgil entered his dressing room, Chief Wainwright stayed right with him. When the show began, the police chief was across the stage beside the wheelable vault, watching the performance from the far wing. Kendry dropped in for a short while, then went out to find a seat in the audience.

As the show progressed, Miriam kept curbing her nervousness, trying to copy Norgil, who was as suave and easy of manner as ever. She was wondering if old Brighton had arrived to see the show; and that thought, curiously, was in her mind when a stagehand stopped her as she was leaving the stage to change her costume.

"Somebody on the telephone," the stagehand told her. "He wants to talk to Mr. Cragey, but I can't find him. So he says he'll talk to you instead."

Miriam hurried to the backstage telephone. On stage, Norgil was in the midst of a rapid-fire illusion act, and the blare of the orchestra made it very difficult for the girl to hear the voice across the wire. Then, as the music faded, she caught a query uttered in a tone she recognized.

"Miss Laymond?" The wheezy tone belonged to old Brighton, the jeweler. "Are you listening, Miss Laymond?"

"Yes." Miriam's tone was breathless. Brighton's anxiety

told her that the unexpected was due. "What is it?"

"Write this, with paper and pencil—"

Snatching at a pencil that dangled from a string, Miriam recorded what Brighton told her on a scratch pad that lay beneath the telephone. She was thankful that the music continued its lull during those important seconds.

For Rodney Brighton was speaking in numbers. The old jeweler was giving her the combination that would open the steel door of Norgil's vault!

Chapter III THE MASKED MARAUDER

THE SHOW had half an hour to go, but Miriam had only three of those thirty minutes in which to change her costume. She knew that she could make it, for her present attire consisted only of a pair of slippers and a ballet dress.

Reaching her dressing room, Miriam kicked off the slippers and yanked the zippers that controlled the ballet costume. She made a mad scramble into a pair of Chinese pajamas, tucked her feet into wooden sandals, and clattered out to the stage just as the orchestra hit the opening notes of an Oriental melody.

The Chinese Water Act was starting. Norgil, garbed as a mandarin magician, was causing mysterious fountains to rise here and there about the stage: from grotesque idols, sword blades, even from the fingertips of his assistants, including Miriam.

It was a silent act, however, and Miriam had no opportunity to whisper the news to the magician. When the curtains closed in, Norgil was in front of them, beginning a card

routine that he worked in one. Miriam had to hurry and make another costume change for the finale.

In fact, the whole show was ended before Miriam managed to reach Norgil at the center of the stage and press the precious paper into his hand. Applause indicated that the curtain was about to rise so the magician could take another bow. Miriam blurted: "The combination!" When Norgil quickly asked, "Who from?" the girl had just time to answer "Brighton" before she dashed offstage.

Too excited to get dressed, Miriam put on a dark cape to cover the scanty gold sequin costume that she had worn in the finale. Changing her gold slippers for a pair of black ones, she hurried from the dressing room, hoping for another word with Norgil.

It was too late. The vault had been wheeled on stage under the supervision of Police Chief Wainwright. The open door gaped toward the audience, while the rear of the rather commodious vault was against a velvet backdrop.

People invited from the audience were gingerly inspecting the interior of the vault, as if afraid that someone would slam the door on them. Miriam saw James Kendry watching from a box, but there was no sign of Rodney Brighton, the third committee member.

Going through a connecting door that led to the audience, Miriam gained a vantage spot from a side aisle. She saw Chief Wainwright usher Norgil into the vault, then close the door in an important fashion. Facing the audience, Wainwright smoothed his uniform and stood with all the dignity that went with an official act.

Miriam wished that Harold Greebe could be on hand to see the short work that Norgil would make of the vault door. Within a very few minutes, she thought that she saw the steel blockade begin an outward swing. Then she was biting her lips, chafing at her own imagination.

The vault door didn't open. It remained tight shut and stayed that way for a full ten minutes. A horrible sensation overwhelmed Miriam. She realized that Brighton, if he sympathized with Greebe instead of Norgil, could have deliberately given her the wrong combination!

Sensing a trick whereby Norgil had been induced to enter the vault instead of finding an excuse to call off the test, Miriam struck upon a remedy. Stealing backstage, she obtained a .22 revolver from her dressing room trunk and slipped it into a pocket of her cape. Heading out through the stage alley, Miriam took the shortcut to Brighton's store, grimly determined to make the old jeweler give her the correct combination, should she find him still there.

Not until she actually reached the arcade did Miriam realize that if she gained the combination there would still be the problem of conveying it to Norgil in the vault. Nevertheless she kept ahead to Brighton's door, where she made a discovery that stopped her with a gasp.

Though the store was dark, the door was open! Its lock had been broken, and as Miriam mechanically pushed the door inward, she saw the blink of a flashlight inside the place. It wasn't Brighton who was using the light. The glow from a side window showed one person only in the place, and he was not the jeweler.

The man was the Masked Marauder!

He was stooped in front of Brighton's open safe, and the blinks of the flashlight showed an empty interior. Miriam could see the mask that covered the invader's face; as he stooped, she pictured him loading jewels into a bag that was somewhere in the darkness of the floor.

Steadily advancing with her gun, the girl was about to accost the much-wanted crook when the masked man reached along the wall. His hand struck something that a burglar would ordinarily have regarded as unlucky, but

in this case it worked to the masked man's advantage.

The thing was an alarm switch. A terrific clangor began throughout the one-room jewelry store. Leaping about, the invader chanced to swing his flashlight squarely upon Miriam. Startled by the burst of the alarm, the girl wasn't quick enough with her gun.

With a swift drive, the masked man snatched the weapon and bowled Miriam out into the arcade. Suppressing her struggles and her outcries, he hauled her to one end of the dimly lighted passage; there, he suddenly propelled her half across a narrow street and wheeled about to reverse his course.

Miriam saw the reason as she came to her hands and knees. A policeman had dashed in from the other end of the arcade, on the run toward the jewelry store. Using a revolver twice the size of Miriam's, the Masked Marauder was blasting away at the officer. As the cop dived frantically for cover, the masked man kept on through the arcade to the next street.

A police whistle shrilled. Having successfully dodged the Masked Marauder's fire, the officer was taking up the chase. Miriam heard the whine of a patrol car's siren from the other street. Fortunately, the pursuit was starting away from the direction of the theater. Wrapping the torn cape about her tiny two-piece sequin costume, Miriam began a reverse trip through the alleyways.

There was a truck pulled up beside the stage door when she neared it, and three men who formed its crew were helping Norgil's assistants put some trunks on board. Miriam waited until they went into the theater, then she started forward. Almost at the truck, she stopped.

Another figure had come into sight, dodging away from the truck's dim lights. Miriam gained a good look at him as he sidled toward the stage door. Not only by the quick sneak that he made, but by the mask that covered his face, did she recognize him as the very man that she had battled in the arcade!

The Masked Marauder had reversed his course, sending the patrol car on a blind chase. Why he wanted to enter the theater Miriam couldn't guess, unless he needed an alibi to account for his recent actions. Two names fixed themselves in the girl's mind—those of Harold Greebe and Rodney Brighton.

The man could be Greebe, moving in stoop-shouldered fashion; possibly he was Brighton, showing unusual agility. But such guesses didn't help Miriam's own dilemma. She had to get out of sight quickly, before the masked man saw her. With that idea, the girl scrambled into the back of the truck, making more noise than she intended.

Through slats in the truck's sides she could look through the stage door. She glimpsed the big vault with the police chief standing stolidly in front of it, evidence that Norgil was still a prisoner, with a good part of his hour gone.

But there was no sign of the Masked Marauder against the lights that glimmered from the stage. Naturally he wouldn't have remained there, for the truckmen would soon be coming out, bringing some of Norgil's luggage.

Since he would hardly be foolish enough to sneak around backstage, Miriam decided that the crook must have gone through the connecting door to reach the audience, where he could become an unmasked spectator to Norgil's fading chances at escape. Then Miriam had the harrowing thought that the masked man might still be close at hand, lurking near the truck!

The girl needed a hiding place, and a quick one. Probing among baggage that had already been loaded, she came upon an old packing case just behind the driver's seat. Loose nails groaned as Miriam wrenched the lid open, intending to get inside the box if it proved empty.

Through her brain thrummed those two names: Greebe and Brighton. Was Greebe the crook, engaged in new crime

tonight? Or had Brighton faked a robbery of his own store, after bluffing Norgil into chancing the vault escape?

It was the light above the stage door that suddenly eliminated one of those two men from the burden of crime. The light was quite brilliant, and it shone squarely into the packing case as the lid came up. Staring, Miriam saw that the box was not empty.

A face was leering up at her—a grotesque, blood-streaked face that had bulging, sightless eyes. It was a face that belonged to a scrawny, contorted form, packed into the box in one of those inhuman twists that only a dead body could take.

Yes, the man in the packing box was very dead, but his features were quite recognizable. He was the crime's victim, not its instigator.

The murdered man was the jeweler, Rodney Brighton!

Chapter IV

NORGIL'S FAILURE

STUNNED BY the discovery of Brighton's body, Miriam forgot her own plight. She wanted to talk to Norgil, but there still might be many minutes before he broke loose from the vault, if he managed it at all. Worming toward the back of the truck, the girl was thinking of reporting her find to the police chief. Then she saw the mistake of that idea.

If Harold Greebe had actually entered the theater he would be watching from the audience. He would see Miriam talking to Chief Wainwright, unless the girl had someone call the official from the stage. In either case the thing would be a giveaway if the unmasked crook observed it.

A return of caution caused Miriam to huddle in the darkness of baggage near the back of the truck. Then, through the slats, she saw two burly figures coming from the stage door carrying a big trunk between them. They were the truckmen, real friends in need.

As the two men neared the truck, Miriam dropped off and waved her arms in front of them. They let the trunk hit the ground when they heard the girl's hoarse-whispered warning. Then, with a simultaneous lunge, the two men were upon her. Miriam caught a glimpse of the third truckman springing out from the stage door to join his pals in the lopsided struggle.

They were enemies, not friends. They hurled Miriam into the truck; ripping her cape from her shoulders, they used it to smother her cries. Struggling was useless. Miriam's arms were pinned in back of her. Horny hands were clamping her bare legs and wiry body. Everything was black beneath the cape that covered the girl's head, and Miriam's ears were deafened by a huge roar.

Into her sinking consciousness came the vague blare of distant music. Closer were the thudding sounds of fists delivering thwacks and punches that Miriam could not feel, although they mingled with the crackling roar. Then, as Miriam made a last futile gasp for breath, her senses left her entirely.

Actually, a great volume of triumphant music had welled from the theater while Miriam was being overpowered. With Norgil's hour almost gone, Steve Craggy had signaled for the orchestra to cut loose with the "Stars and Stripes Forever."

The tune was a bit previous, for Norgil had not opened the vault door. But Steve was banking on the possibility that the magician, always a showman, was holding out to the last minute. Fearing that Norgil might misgauge the time, Steve was having the music tell him that it was time to quit stalling, if—as Steve was trying to make himself

believe—there was any chance that the magician *could* escape.

Worried by the orchestra's outburst, Chief Wainwright stared at the vault door, then regained his pompous composure. He looked across at James Kendry, who had joined him on the stage to stand on the other side of the vault. Solemnly, Kendry glanced at his watch and lifted two fingers to signal the number of minutes that remained.

Except for those two members of the committee, the stage was deserted. People from the audience had gone back to their seats. Even Norgil's assistants had left the stage to attend to the packing. The orchestra was still crashing away at the "Stars and Stripes," but the martial strain was losing all significance of a triumph, until a rangy, square-jawed man turned it into a tribute for himself.

The arrival was Harold Greebe. Coming down the aisle, he used the steps that led up to the stage, while Kendry was raising one finger. Halting at the top of the rundown, Greebe bowed to the audience, then pumped his arms for the orchestra to hit it louder.

During that last minute, Greebe stood watching the steel-faced vault door, until Kendry gave a solemn nod. As Chief Wainwright stepped forward, Greebe thrust his thumb downward. The orchestra silenced.

Pompously, the police chief announced that Norgil had failed. He pronounced Greebe the winner of the five thousand dollars that the magician had promised to pay. Murmurs passed through the audience, but the whole throng remained. All wanted to see the opening of the vault.

Greebe had fixed the door frame so that the task would be easy enough—from the outside. Chief Wainwright performed the needed action; the steel door began to open of its own accord. A hollow gasp echoed from the audience when the huddled figure of Norgil proved to be the motivating power.

Rolling from the vault, the magician sprawled full length

and lay still. Shrieks drowned the police chief's bellows for a physician, but finally a flood of doctors reached the stage of their own accord.

Norgil's prompt recovery averted a stampede. Brought to his feet, the magician shook his head and blinked. He saw Greebe and shook hands with his rival. Then, stepping to the footlights, Norgil made a brief announcement. He stated, with occasional pauses, that lack of air in the vault had prevented his escape.

He had misjudged the air capacity, so he claimed; otherwise he would not have entered a cell that was totally sealed. When he played a return engagement in Wilmingdale he would undertake the same escape with proper precautions to insure an oxygen supply.

The speech won the audience. Norgil had combined sportsmanship with showmanship. The theater rocked with applause for Norgil. There were boos and catcalls for Greebe when the big-jawed man started an angry protest. In the midst of it the curtain fell, at Norgil's signal. The magician added a neat touch by yanking Greebe back to safety just as the heavy batten was about to strike his rival's head.

Greebe didn't thank Norgil for the favor. Instead, Greebe began to put on a show of his own, which was witnessed by Wainwright, Kendry, and a large crowd of grinning stagehands who edged in from the wings.

"That speech of yours was no alibi!" stormed Greebe. "You can't get out of paying me the five thousand dollars!"

Norgil looked at the vault and smiled.

"Being in there was an alibi for about everything," he remarked cryptically, "except for the payment of the cash. You'll get what you deserve, Greebe. Don't worry."

"I'd like to see the money."

"I'll hand it over to the committee. By the way"—Norgil was looking about the group—"where is Brighton?"

Greebe began to argue that the jeweler's presence was unnecessary. But Norgil maintained the opposite and appealed to Chief Wainwright, who finally supported him.

"Very well," purred the magician. "Since Brighton isn't here, we'll go over to his jewelry store and see him there. Is everyone agreeable?"

With that question the magician looked from man to man, waiting for the reaction that he knew was due to come. Out of apparent failure, Norgil was paving the way to a surprising success!

Chapter V

CRIME'S GIVEAWAY

TO SHOW how agreeable he was to Norgil's suggestion, Harold Greebe became vociferous. His earlier accusations seemed tame in comparison to those that he now hurled.

"Let's get started!" he stormed. "The sooner we see Brighton, the better. Only I insist that you bring some of your men along, chief"—Greebe swung to Wainwright—"in case Norgil tries to slide out of this.

"You've let one crook give you the runaround, that fellow they call the Masked Marauder. If you want to keep your job in this burg, Wainwright, you'd better not let another give you the slip."

Norgil merely showed surprise at Greebe's outburst. Chief Wainwright became so purple that his blue uniform looked pale. While the chief was trying to put his indignation into words, James Kendry inserted a protest.

"Norgil isn't a crook!" exclaimed the solemn man. "You've overstepped yourself, Greebe. I, for one, refuse to move an

inch from this theater until you calm down and apologize.”

The words cooled Greebe. Apologizing, he offered his hand to Norgil, who accepted the clasp. Meanwhile, Kendry’s undertone to Chief Wainwright was quite audible.

“An apology isn’t enough,” said Kendry. “We must show our confidence in Norgil. I know that he intends to leave town early tomorrow, but let’s ask him to stay later in the day so we can see Brighton then.”

Chief Wainwright was nodding his agreement when an objection came, not from Greebe, but from Norgil.

“Greebe is right,” said the magician calmly. “The sooner we see Brighton, the better. If Kendry has further reasons for objection, it’s the right time for him to—”

The rest was interrupted by a pair of excited officers who dashed in from the stage door. Seeing Wainwright, one shouted the news:

“Brighton’s store has been robbed, chief! By the same masked guy we’re after. Only he got away!”

“Are you sure?”

It was Norgil who put the question. He was looking hard at Kendry. In reply, the fellow lost his solemn look and let out a fierce snarl. With the speed of a striking snake Kendry’s hand went for his hip, but Norgil’s move was just as fast.

Lunging for the self-admitted crook, Norgil caught him in a grapple. But before others could help the Masked Marauder, Kendry’s own tribe were in the fray. They were crooks who had slipped in from the audience to stand among the stagehands. They had guns. They wanted Norgil as their target.

Before the crooks could score with bullets, Norgil reeled Kendry into the vault. Greebe, seeing that the magician had the upper hand, showed quick head work by flinging the door shut. When their bullets bashed steel, the thugs turned to battle Chief Wainwright and the two officers.

The crooks had the police outnumbered and expected

additional help from the truckmen in the alley. Instead, the reserves who piled into the fray were Norgil's own assistants, headed by Fritz. Guns were slugging at quarters too close for shots when the deciding factor entered.

That factor was Norgil. He appeared suddenly in front of the vault, bringing Kendry's gun. His shots, placed with cool precision, nipped enough crooks to take the fight out of the rest. When the sullen mob was rounded up, Norgil unlatched the vault door. Within lay James Kendry, slugged into submission.

"There's your Masked Marauder," he told the police chief. Then, catching words from Miriam, who had entered: "He murdered Brighton. The body is in the truck outside. But don't forget: I made the capture. You can pay the five thousand reward to my friend Greebe, to cover the amount I owe him."

Since Kendry's own exhibition had covered him with guilt, further explanations were not needed—except to Miriam. When the others had gone, Norgil found himself confronted by a very inquisitive brunette, who still hadn't found time to put on more clothes than her little costume of gold sequins.

"The game was this," explained Norgil. "Kendry forced Brighton to phone that combination. He also made him open his safe. Then Kendry did away with Brighton and boxed his body to go along with my baggage. He figured that when I escaped from the vault, I'd be labeled as a safe-cracker when Brighton's place was found rifled in the morning."

Miriam's nod told that so far all was obvious.

"So I didn't open the vault door," continued Norgil. "As long as it stayed shut I had a perfect alibi, because the police chief had been watching me from the time we saw Brighton alive. I tried the combination and found it worked. But I had them release me from the vault, so I could test Kendry later."

"And test Greebe, too?"

"Of course. Even Brighton was a possibility, until you found his body. But I thought the truckers might be phony. That's why I had Fritz and the boys watching them."

Again, Miriam nodded. Fritz and the rest had suppressed the crooked truck drivers just in time to prevent Miriam from being smothered. What she couldn't understand was how Norgil had learned of the robbery at Brighton's while he was still in the vault. She told the magician what puzzled her.

"I left the vault," stated Norgil, very calmly. "I was the masked man you met at Brighton's!"

"But why—"

"Why didn't I tell you?" laughed Norgil. "I was afraid you would be grabbed and have to testify against me. You see, at the time I left the theater, none of the three—Greebe, Kendry or Brighton—was on the stage. So I made a mask out of a handkerchief and rang the alarm so the police would show up and blame the robbery on the real crook. That gun I used was full of blanks."

Miriam saw the point at once. With his own alibi established, Norgil had simply thrown the blame where it belonged. The giveaway had been Kendry's refusal to go to Brighton's, because the crook knew that a visit there would expose a crime that wasn't supposed to have happened until Norgil lacked an alibi.

But that didn't explain the most amazing fact of all—Norgil's ability to leave the vault without unlocking the door. As she thought it over, Miriam remembered something that others had overlooked in the confusion. Norgil had been in and out of the vault a second time, when he settled Kendry and showed up to dominate the fighting thugs.

"In my agreement with Greebe," remarked Norgil, as he led Miriam to the vault, "I did not specify that I would unlock the steel door. I merely stated that I would get out of

the vault or forfeit five thousand dollars. Am I correct?"

"Quite," acknowledged Miriam.

"I built the vault myself," reminded Norgil. "Remembering Houdini's famous trick of walking through a brick wall, I decided to include it. Not Houdini's version, which called for the wall to be built in public, but one good enough for my purpose."

At the rear wall of the vault, Norgil pushed the solid bricks. A jagged cavity opened. The irregular line of mortar surrounding it was thin steel, painted white along the edges. The opening showed a space through the slitted velvet backdrop.

"I intended to do a runaround," confided Norgil, "and come on stage from the audience. I'd have had the police chief open the vault and find it really empty while the orchestra was playing the 'Stars and Stripes'; but instead"—he shook his head regretfully—"I went in and out of the thing. Just so Greebe could get five thousand dollars he needed because I gave Wainwright a crook he couldn't catch."

Miriam felt rueful, too.

"In addition," she said, "you had to admit a failure."

Norgil shook his head.

"I'm coming back to Wilmingdale," he reminded. "When I do, I'll challenge Greebe again. I'll have Wainwright head the committee. I'll build a solid vault, yet I'll open that steel door, even with a new combination!"

"But who," asked Miriam in wonder, "will give you the new combination?"

"Greebe and Wainwright both," chuckled Norgil, confident in his prophecy. "They'll be tripping over each other, trying to be the first to tell me!"

THE END

The Magician Norgil, tall and handsome in full evening dress, and Ling Ro, the pantomime Chinese magician, are both anagrams of Loring, the sophisticated stage illusionist who divides his time equally between crimefighting and conjuring. There have been 23 adventures written about him, the first in the November 1937 issue of *Crime Busters*, the last in the November 1940 issue of *Mystery Magazine*. This is the second collection of those tales. The first—and the first collection of stories about a magician detective ever published—was issued in 1977 by The Mysterious Press.

The Author Walter B. Gibson wrote 283 novels about The Shadow, 282 under the Street & Smith house name of Maxwell Grant. He has also written nearly 40 books about magic, both under his own name and as a ghostwriter for Houdini, Thurston and other famous magicians. In addition to books and countless articles on a wide range of subjects, from psychic phenomena to puzzles and sports, he created numerous fictional characters, only two of which appeared in pulp magazines—The Shadow, the most famous pulp creation of them all, and the long forgotten Norgil the Magician, created while Gibson was at the height of his productive powers.

The Artist Steranko's talents are as diverse as they are genuine. As a youngster, he became an expert magician able to perform the type of escapes made famous by Houdini and progressed to dazzling close-up magic and card tricks. He has written the definitive history of the comics, illustrated several comic book series, including *Nick Fury*, *Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Captain America*, created and developed several comic book heroes himself, and recently wrote and illustrated *Chandler*, an innovative pictorial hard-boiled detective thriller. One of the best-known cover and magazine artists in America, he has enhanced the recent paperback series of novels about The Shadow with his pulp-style artwork. He also produced the dust jacket illustration for the first Norgil volume.

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